

HCSS StratMon 2016

GREAT POWER ASSERTIVITIS



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The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This study continues HCSS' effort to monitor great power assertiveness (GPA). We qualify a country as becoming more assertive when either its projected (factual) or professed (rhetorical) power increases. To ascertain whether this is the case, we collect different datasets: some more traditional ones (with economic and – especially – military indicators); and a few new ones – especially the large and automatically generated event datasets that have become available over these past few years and that dynamically track international interactions on a daily basis. The combination of these indicators offers unprecedented insights into the ebb and flow of international cooperation and conflict. In this report, HCSS focuses on some great powers (in this study: China, 'Europe', India, Russia and the United States) that wield disproportionate influence on the international system. The historical record shows that great powers tend to participate more in militarized conflict, to impose more economic sanctions, to possess more nuclear weapons, to form more military alliances and to mediate or intervene more in civil and international conflicts. This means that the entire international community has a stake in closely monitoring their behavior and their statements. That is precisely what this report, which is part of HCSS' contribution to the Dutch government's *Strategic Monitor* effort this year, sets out to do. The different datasets we have collated and analyzed this year paint a differentiated, but overall worrisome picture about the assertiveness of these actors in the international system.

Our datasets do not reveal increased great power assertiveness across the board. Our event data do show that the presumably most dangerous form of assertiveness – the factual negative military one – did increase quite noticeably over the past few years. When we look at the other (non-event-based) indicators of assertiveness, however, we find a more balanced picture. Overall arms sales by great powers have declined somewhat in recent years and they stay significantly below the high levels that characterized the Cold War. Military expenditures by all great powers taken together have stabilized and even

declined somewhat in recent years after steady increases in the first decade of this century. In terms of military personnel as percentage of the active labor force, 2013 was the lowest year since 1992. Great powers deployed significantly fewer troops in 2013 than in 2012 (from 330k to 280k). In 2014, that trend was reversed somewhat (to 285k) but still remained significantly lower than in 2013.

The various weapon systems that we looked at also show a mixed picture. We see fairly sizeable increases in overall number of 4th and 5th generation aircraft, attack helicopters, cruisers/destroyers; heavy unmanned aerial vehicles, modern AIFVs, main battle tanks (they were still declining in 2012, but then increased significantly in 2013) and principal amphibious ships. But we observe declines in bomber aircraft, frigates and in tankers/mixed tanker-transport aircraft. Other categories either increased slightly or stayed even. We hasten to add that, based on the steep longer-term investment plans of both Russia and China, these countries' projected future trajectories presage a darker future in many of these categories. But at this moment in time, the evidence we collected does not show the major spikes in *overall* great power assertiveness that pundits seem to assume.

When we turn our attention to *individual* great powers, however, the data reveal a quite different and more threatening picture – even just based on current data (and not projected trends). Here we find two Great Powers that show clear signs of what we have called *assertivitis* – an affliction characterized by an almost pathological (from a Western European point of view) inclination to assert one's power, especially in negative ways. We find one case – China – of developed assertivitis and one – Russia – of inchoate (but recidivist) acute assertivitis. We find another great power – the United States – that has been suffering from chronic assertivitis for an extended period of time but seems to have embarked upon the path of (a modest and uneven) recovery. And we find two Great Powers – India and the European Union – that are by and large asymptomatic and do not (yet?) appear to be suffering from this affliction. They exhibit an overall much lower-profile stance, even though they too display what may still prove to be early symptoms of assertivitis: in the case of Europe mostly in the (both positive *and* negative) economic realm; and in the case of India in a number of forms of positive assertiveness.

In our 2014 report we noted that tensions between great powers had increased, even though we still saw powerful countervailing trends that provided at least a modicum of anti-dote to *assertivitis*. We argued that “the sentiment was, and to a large extent remains, that on balance, all potential challengers felt and continue to feel sufficiently inhibited to engage into too much brinkmanship. It is important to stress that we see no evidence across our various datasets that this balance has crossed some definitive tipping point. Changes appear to be more linear than exponential.” This year’s report leaves us more worried than in 2014. We have no way to reliably discern where exactly the ‘tipping point’ lies that might push the world over the brink. But we certainly see a number of great powers – and thus the world as a whole – recklessly moving full steam ahead towards it. The chance of a ‘Cuban Missile crisis’-type event (or worse) in Syria, the South China Sea, Ukraine, Moldova, the Baltics or elsewhere – whether because of miscalculation and unmanageable escalation – continues to increase.

Where does all of this leave Europe in general, and the Netherlands in particular? Our analysis of how the Netherlands fits into this great power assertiveness dynamic still paints an overall comfortingly positive picture. But the MH17 tragedy showed that these fairly positive ‘fundamentals’ offer absolutely no guarantee that the country will not be pulled into some of these dangerous downwards spirals. There can be no ‘splendid isolation’ from these global gales of renewed assertiveness – not even for a small European power that at first glance may seem to be comfortably nested in a ‘safe’ neighborhood. The country’s interconnectedness with its close European and transatlantic partners and with the broader world beyond that is bound to expose it to the broader worrying trends that we describe in this report.

This suggests the need to reflect on how even a relatively small country like the Netherlands can deal with such outbreaks of great powers *assertivitis*. The concluding chapter of this report tries to formulate some policy suggestions. In previous reports we have emphasized a number of actionable insights for defense and security organizations to deal with assertiveness. These insights include, inter alia, the importance of collective defense and the strengthening of alliance commitments, the rationale of investing in robust and full spectrum military operability, the need to boost crisis management capabilities, and the utility of preventive crisis diplomacy. By now, these insights have been not only

well rehearsed but also further developed in a plentitude of reports and studies published by think tanks and research institutes across the Alliance.

This year we therefore decided to explore how negative forms of assertiveness are dealt with in other walks of life. For this, we turned to the – quite well-developed and -documented – literature on bullying in schools in search of inspiration and analogies for how to address great power assertiveness. The findings from this literature suggest a number of concrete ‘interventions’ that do seem to bear fruit. The most important of those is that a system-wide (as opposed to ad-hoc) approach is called for that also contains distinct elements of disciplining. Interventions need to target the perpetrator at multiple levels, addressing the overall social context in which the bully operates and directly taking on and trying to change his incentive structure. Firm sanctions are not to be shied away from. It goes without saying that the governance structure in the educational realm is different from that in the realm of world politics. Schools (and school districts and national educational authorities) have a clear mandate from their stakeholders to deal with bullying. Despite the existence of the United Nations, the same cannot be said of the international system.

Still, we venture a few suggestions on what we think the Dutch defense ecosystem – and its international counterparts – might be able to do about state ‘bullies’. Since this study focused on mapping the manifestations of great power assertiveness, and not on identifying the pathways that lead to it, these suggestions are best seen as our best-effort attempts to suggest useful and actionable courses of action to be experimented with.

Monitor and expose dangerous GPA. Given the unique role that great powers play in world affairs and the escalatory dangers that lurk behind various forms of (especially military) assertiveness, any effective strategy for dealing with GPA requires a more fine-tuned and reliable facts-based sensing mechanism that would allow the international community to ring the alarm bell as soon as certain agreed thresholds are crossed. Our own attempts at monitoring great power assertiveness suggest, we hope, that it is increasingly possible to flag ‘excessive’ brinkmanship based on detailed and balanced near-real time evidence. Authoritative international organizations like the IMF, the World Bank, the World Trade Organization and the Organization for Economic

Cooperation and Development already perform analogous international monitoring efforts in areas like economic, education, health, trade policy, etc. It seems unlikely that our current international security organizations (NATO, OSCE, AU, UN, etc.) would be willing to assume such a role. But it may prove possible for a number of smaller countries from different continents to team up to provide the international community with such a capability. Crucial is that the message should not be part of a ‘Calimero’ narrative, but evidence-based. This is not naming and shaming, but letting the cold facts speak for themselves.

Puncture pathos and promote perspective. Negative assertive behavior is regularly couched by the perpetrators in emotional verbiage about past endured injustices, unfair treatment, misunderstood actions, etc. Whether such allegations are legitimate or not can only be established by disassembling them into fact and fiction with surgical precision. If the international community wants to make some progress in this area, it stands to reason that it will have to find more reliably neutral ways to puncture the pathos with the facts and figures – especially towards the societies on all sides that are subjected to various distorted or one-sided narratives. This may be an area where dispassionate epistemic communities from various countries (preferably also from the countries involved – actively and passively – in assertive behavior) could play a uniquely positive role.

Mobilize moderation. Most societies (like individuals) carry in themselves the seeds of both moderation and excess. Societies that are being swept up by their own or by external political entrepreneurs into bouts of jingoistic fervor typically still contain silent majorities that just condone or go along with these excesses (as well as smaller groups that might actively resist it). In this age of global connectivity, it is more possible than ever before to reach and empower those groups or even individuals. Individual countries like the Netherlands could certainly play a role in this area in a number of selected countries where their interests are at stake. In some of the vignettes we wrote into our *‘Si vis pacem, para utique pacem’* study, for instance, HCSS suggested that the 1st Civil-Military Integration Command of the Dutch Army could have played a role along these lines in the run-up to the dramatic events in Ukraine in 2014¹. In

¹ Oosterveld et al., *Si Vis Pacem, Para Utique Pacem. Individual Empowerment, Societal Resilience and the Armed Forces.*: 98-101.

light of the large streams of refugees from different conflict zones that have looked for, and found, refuge in the Netherlands, it would certainly be interesting to experiment with various ways in which these communities could be used to re-empower the agents of security resilience in their troubled regions of origin.

Step up early to a ‘light’ mode of crisis management. As the general ‘assertiveness’ literature suggests, interventions need to target the bully at multiple levels, addressing the overall – social or otherwise – context in which the bully operates and directly taking on and trying to change his incentive structure. Firm deterrent and compellent measures are not to be shied away from. In the realm of international relations, this means that one should consider aggressive assertive behavior as a first step on a crisis escalation ladder. This recognition implies that one should start applying crisis management procedures and techniques. However, stepping up into a crisis management mode should be seen as a smooth and unobtrusive process, and not as an assertive, escalatory move itself (hence our use of the word ‘light’). Once in such a mode, the lessons listed in a dedicated paper on Crisis Management that HCSS has recently produced as part of its contribution to the Strategic Monitor fully apply.

Chapter ‘VI-and-a-Quarter’ Efforts? The international community currently does not have the wherewithal to take a firm stand against excessive assertiveness. It can – and regularly does – express concern or even condemn certain actions by great powers. But some of the great powers that this report identifies as some of the worst ‘culprits’ still have veto powers in the Security Council. This severely limits the scope and likelihood of more muscular internationally sanctioned interventions in these perilous dynamics. The UN Charter just talks about Chapter VI (the peaceful resolution of disputes by diplomatic or judicial means) discussions and Chapter VII (peace enforcement) military operations. Over the past few decades, however, the term ‘Chapter VI-and-a-Half’ has become popular as a solution ‘in between’ Chapters VI and VII. It was coined by former UN Secretary General Dag Hammarskjöld to cover the numerous – quite successful – peacekeeping operations that have been carried out under the UN flag. Would it be conceivable to also start thinking about Chapter ‘VI-and-a-Quarter’ efforts whereby the United Nations, once the observed level of assertiveness of a certain great power crosses a certain pre-defined threshold, could step up its efforts along the lines described in the

previous bullets? And could parts of the Dutch Armed Forces pursue their second ‘main task’ by playing a role in this – not to weaken, but instead to “protect and promote the international rule of law”, as stated in Art. 97 of the Constitution?

Catalyze ‘Adult Supervision’. All major (and not-so-major) players in the international system – including companies, NGOs, cities, etc. – are affected by the clear and present dangers that growing great power assertiveness represent. Given the limitations of international global governance, the broader international community might be triggered to develop a number of complementary mechanisms to deal with this. It is, for instance, conceivable that some of them would organize ‘global solutions networks’ around great power assertiveness that would ‘clinically’ monitor behavior, dissect rhetoric, ‘target’ silent majorities, identify possible ways out of impasses. Defense and security organizations – maybe even especially of a number of small- and medium-sized countries – might be able to play a catalytic role in this development.

As in previous years, we continue to caution against too one-sidedly gloomy a picture of global security trends. Even in the assertive great powers China and Russia, and also in the United States, the evidence presented in this study deals with how these countries’ ‘officialdom’ asserts national power globally. We did not explicitly examine to what extent this ‘official’ assertiveness is supported by these countries’ societies. There can be little doubt that in all three aforementioned cases there is a significant degree of domestic political support for such assertive behavior and rhetoric. But we also are starting to see – certainly (recently) in Russia and (since the beginning of this decade) in the United States – that this support is not unconditional and that it can backfire. When people start feeling the ‘fallout’ of such assertive behavior in their own pocketbooks, jingoistic siren songs lose a lot of their appeal. It will be interesting to see whether we start observing similar trends in China as well if or when its economic fortunes start to turn. In that case, like in Russia, the regime may still try to whip up nationalist sentiments to deflect attention from these internal troubles. But, again like in Russia, it remains to be seen whether today’s societies remain malleable to such an extent for such a long time. We also know that every one of these countries is undergoing profound societal changes that are

triggered by the physical- and social-technological revolutions that are engulfing the entire world. But these countervailing trends do not and cannot discharge us from our responsibility to address current symptoms of great power assertivitis in our defense and security thinking and planning.

First and foremost, as we emphasized in our previous report, we still feel it is of critical importance to get the assertiveness story ‘right’. We feel we made some further steps towards this goal in this report by broadening the evidentiary base of our analysis. But we remain conscious of the fact that there is more that we have to (and probably can) do on this score. For every single claim that country X or Y is engaging in unacceptable assertive activities, we should be able to put that claim against the background of what we ourselves and others are doing. There may even be an opportunity to construct such dispassionate, evidence-based datasets in cooperation with researchers from these countries themselves – an opportunity HCSS is eager to pursue.

But even if we get the story ‘right’, we still have to be able to design a portfolio of policy, capability and partnership options to deal with these demonstrable cases of destabilizing *assertivitis*. This report is part of the Dutch government’s effort to monitor its security environment. As such, its focus has been on the diagnosis more than on the therapy. But we want to conclude this report by a clarion call for a broader discussion about how we, as the Netherlands, as Europe, as the international community respond to these cases of *assertivitis*. Many seem to think that we should counter assertiveness with assertiveness – that Europe, for instance, should start behaving more like the others great powers. We continue to think that an asymmetric response – an anti-assertiveness strategy instead of a counter-assertiveness one – might prove to be a more promising option. We would certainly welcome a broader debate on this.

INTRODUCTION

Great power rivalry is back. Pundits talk about a “new era in which great power coercive diplomacy supplants the supposedly rules-based liberal world order that the United States and its allies have painstakingly attempted to build over the last 70 years²”. The basic storyline that most analysts of international security and international relations have been propounding for these past few years is that the world’s tectonic plates have started shifting again. The narratives behind these trends vary significantly.

Western analysts generally attribute these geotectonic shifts to the fact that the US’ hegemonic position has been challenged on different fronts by a number of up-and-coming nations. Many also claim that the US itself has contributed to these shifts by becoming more reluctant to assert itself in the international arena under the two Obama administrations (2009-2016). The ‘West’ – rarely united – tends to focus on the destabilizing assertive events committed by other great powers, whilst framing its own muscular global activities as necessary interventions by intrinsically more legitimate liberal democratic regimes to right a number of wrongs in the world. This narrative is fed by daily Western news reports that provide ample evidence of various often egregious examples of such increased non-Western great power assertiveness (GPA): Russia’s annexation of Crimea, its meddling in South-Eastern Ukraine and, more recently, its – also militarily – assertive stance in Syria; but also China’s actions and rhetoric in the East and South China Seas and beyond.

Non-Western analysts, on the other hand, claim that the ‘West’ has conjured up these geotectonic shifts by its own assertive behavior. In this narrative the West has been unduly and excessively assertive for far too long, has been applying inconsistent dual standards (“it’s ok when ‘we’ do this, but not when others do this”) and it is now reaping the bitter fruits of that dangerous policy. This narrative

2 Paul D. Miller, “Crimea Proves That Great Power Rivalry Never Left Us | Foreign Policy,” *ForeignPolicy.com*, March 21, 2014, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/03/21/crimea-proves-that-great-power-rivalry-never-left-us/>.

sees liberal democracies as inherently ‘offensive’, as they wish to spread their ‘beliefs’ beyond their borders, ideally globally, through all sorts of ‘hybrid’ means like popular culture or active support for societal change. More authoritarian regimes are seen in this narrative as inherently ‘defensive’, besieged as they are by these alien values imposed by ‘assertive’ foreign liberal democracies and their local henchmen. The main narrative here is that this is a case of chickens coming home to roost. Most readings in this line of thinking put the US in the lead of this global assertive campaign, but with the European Union either actively supporting in or unwittingly condoning US assertive behavior. The (non-Western) ‘rest’ – also in mixed configurations – disputes the West’s moral righteousness and focuses on cases where the West coercively imposed its will, sometimes even against international law³.

One of the striking features of this debate – on both sides – is its selective use of evidence. The sampling of allegedly assertive behavior in both ‘camps’ differs dramatically. We suspect (and even hope) that we have readers on both sides of this debate. We submit, however, that any such debate should start with an attempt to reconstruct the actual ‘big picture’ of great power assertiveness. This is precisely what this reports sets out to do.

This reports continues HCSS’ efforts to monitor great power assertiveness. After a brief recapitulation on how we define and operationalize the concept of assertiveness, this study will report our empirical findings for the past few years⁴. We will take a look at what has happened to assertiveness – factually and rhetorically; diplomatically, economically and militarily – in the world as a whole; we will then zoom in on the evidence for five selected great powers (China, ‘Europe’, India, Russia and the United States); and will also provide some findings on how the Netherlands fit into this broader great power assertiveness story. The report will conclude with some policy suggestions for a small but (pro-)active force provider like the Netherlands.

3 For some examples of these non-Western views on international security, see our forthcoming study on multilingual metafore in this year’s Strategic Monitor.

4 For the event datasets, most of our analysis cover the period from January 1, 2013 to Dec 31, 2015. The discussion about growing assertiveness became very lively in 2014 especially in Europe - caused by Russia’s increasingly strident rhetoric and especially behavior in Ukraine. [The analogous ‘watershed’ year for China seems to have been 2010 with public spats with Japan, South Korea and the United States, see Ralph Cossa and Brad Glosserman, “Return to Asia: It’s Not (All) About China,” *PacNet*, Pacific Forum CSIS, no. 7 (January 30, 2012)., who called this year “year of living arrogantly“]. By going one year further back, our intention was to be able to show these changes more graphically.

1 WHAT IS ASSERTIVENESS AND HOW DO WE KNOW IT WHEN WE SEE IT?

Power lies at the heart of assertiveness. A country's assertiveness conveys how it decides to 'assert'⁵ its power. In our work on assertiveness we differentiate between four aspects of power: the intrinsic power that a state possesses; the power it actually projects; the power it claims to have; and the power others think it has.

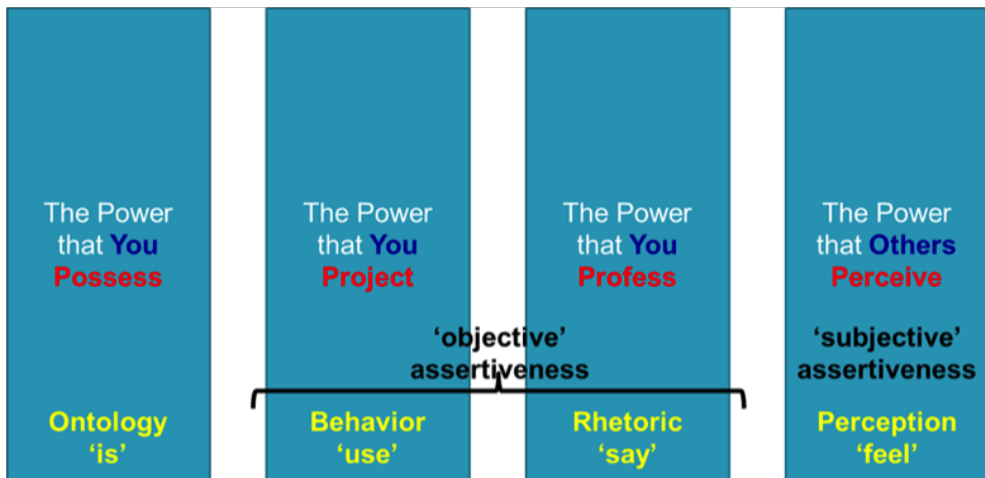


FIGURE 1: DIFFERENT TYPES OF POWER

5 The etymology of the word 'assertiveness' goes back to the Latin verb *asserere* "to claim rights over something, state, maintain, affirm," from ad- "to" (see ad-) + *serere* "join" (see series). By "joining oneself" to a particular view, one "claimed" or "maintained" it.

The first aspect of power (on the left) – the amount of power a country intrinsically possesses – is an abstract construct of a more conceptual nature. Power is one of the – if not *the* – central concept(s) in international relations, even though it has proved fiendishly difficult to operationalize⁶. We can compare this ‘pure’ form of power to another latent form of power in the natural world: gravity. Gravity is a very ‘real’ construct that we cannot observe in its ‘pure’ form, even though we can easily observe it in many of its manifestations such as falling apples. The observable equivalent of this falling apple for state power can be found back in the next two forms of power: the way in which a country’s theoretical power reveals itself through its actual international behavior (which we could call a country’s ‘revealed’ power); and in the way a country proclaims its ability to actuate the latent power it possesses (which we could call ‘stated’ power). The fourth aspect of power (on the right of the visual) is a more subjective one: how other countries perceive a country’s (latent or manifest) power. We have defined ‘assertiveness’ as an increase in any of the three ‘observable’ aspects of power to the right of our visual: in the way a country actuates its power behaviorally and/or rhetorically and also in the way in which others perceive it. In our search for indicators that could help us to *monitor* global assertiveness, we have – so far⁷ – focused on the middle two: behavioral manifestations of increased power and increased rhetorical power assertions. We also differentiate between diplomatic, economic and military manifestations of assertiveness; and between positive (e.g. “Express intent to cooperate economically”) and negative (e.g. “Reject request for humanitarian aid”) forms.

HCSS has been tracking GPA developments since 2014. In our contribution to the Strategic Monitor of 2014⁸, we chronicled how China and Russia had displayed significantly increased assertive (factual and rhetorical) behavior. As

6 An ongoing large-scale research project on great power rivalry at Harvard’s Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs calls the absence of established metrics for assessing national power ‘a major methodological problem: “These terms are regularly used in histories and political science analyses, as well as policy discussions. Yet there are no agreed-upon metrics of national power”. We would like to add that some philosophers of science warn in this context also of the danger of the ‘fallacy of ‘reification’.

7 HCSS keeps experimenting with a number of ways in which we could also add the more subjective perception of other actors’ power, but we do not, as yet, been able to identify one that we feel comfortable enough with. We would be grateful if other readers who are on a similar quest would reach out to us.

8 Stephan De Spiegeleire et al., *Assessing Assertions of Assertiveness: The Chinese and Russian Cases* (The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies, 2014), <http://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=tnRQBAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PP1&dq=GDELT+event+extraction&ots=YFUmqFXoip&sig=YgtluPp54R6V2NM5UULWW6beYxo>

evidence we adduced, among other indicators, a number of frequently used numerical ‘country-year’ datasets⁹ in the diplomatic (vetoes in the UN Security Council), economic (e.g. net Foreign Direct Investment outflows, patent applications), informational (e.g. ‘sourced’ cyberattacks), and military (e.g. military expenditures) realms. In that same 2014 study we also for the first time introduced a new data source that, in our assessment, offers unique promise to provide analysts of international relations with the types of ‘rich’ evidence that economists have been able to use in their field for decades. This much more granular and almost-real-time dataset, GDELT (the Global Database for Events, Language and Tone), automatically extracts events in the sphere of international conflict and cooperation from a large number of international media publications.

In the conclusion of our 2014 report, we pointed to what we called the ‘fog of assertiveness’¹⁰, in which various key actors try to obfuscate their actual assertiveness in various ways. We suggested that more granular evidence-based datasets like GDELT could make a significant contribution to international security by allowing all observers (both the stakeholders themselves and the public at large) to not only track various types of assertiveness but also to put them in perspective. Traditional human-coded ‘country-year datasets’ like those tracking military expenditures, military equipment, etc. can play an important role in this. But they are quite coarse and are only published once a year – often with a time lag of at least one year. The new automated, near-real-time¹¹ datasets for the first time open up possibilities for much more fine-tuned historical, contemporary (e.g. early warning systems) and – in the eyes of some – even predictive analyses of phenomena like great power assertiveness.

9 Datasets that produce data once a year (often after a considerable time interval) and just at the level of countries (i.e. nothing ‘below’ that level; nothing on non-state actors, etc.).

10 Stephan De Spiegeleire and Eline Chivot, “Assessing Assertions of Assertiveness. Are China and Russia Really Becoming More Assertive?,” in *HCSS Strategic Monitor 2013* (HCSS, 2014): 52.

11 GDELT, for instance, generates new data every 15 minutes.

In our work, we re-categorize the various events that are extracted in the event datasets in the following way:

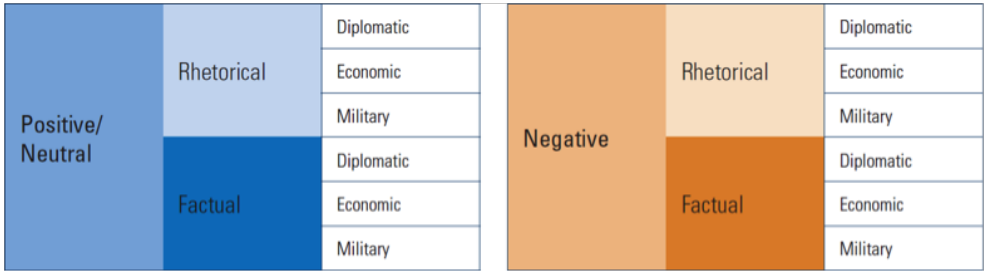


FIGURE 2: HCSS RECODING OF HCSS CAMEO CODES

The following table provides a few illustrative examples of how events are categorized. For example, any event that gets coded by any of the 3 dataset coders as Cameo code 15 – ‘Acknowledge or claim responsibility’ – gets re-coded by us as a rhetorically assertive (the country does not, *stricto sensu*, perform any concrete action) event that is positive or neutral and of a diplomatic nature.

TYPE	TONE	CATEGORY	CAMEO CODE	CAMEO DESCRIPTION
Rhetorical	Positive/Neutral	Diplomatic	15	Acknowledge or claim responsibility
Rhetorical	Positive/Neutral	Diplomatic	16	Deny responsibility
Rhetorical	Positive/Neutral	Diplomatic	313	Express intent to cooperate on judicial matters
Rhetorical	Positive/Neutral	Diplomatic	333	Express intent to provide humanitarian aid
Rhetorical	Positive/Neutral	Diplomatic	52	Defend verbally
Rhetorical	Positive/Neutral	Diplomatic	54	Grant diplomatic recognition
Rhetorical	Positive/Neutral	Economic	311	Express intent to cooperate economically
Rhetorical	Positive/Neutral	Economic	331	Express intent to provide economic aid
Rhetorical	Positive/Neutral	Military	312	Express intent to cooperate militarily
Rhetorical	Positive/Neutral	Military	332	Express intent to provide military aid
Rhetorical	Positive/Neutral	Military	356	Express intent to de-escalate military engagement
Rhetorical	Negative	Diplomatic	64	Share intelligence or information
Rhetorical	Negative	Diplomatic	73	Provide humanitarian aid
Rhetorical	Negative	Diplomatic	75	Grant asylum
Rhetorical	Negative	Economic	61	Cooperate economically
Rhetorical	Negative	Economic	71	Provide economic aid
Rhetorical	Negative	Economic	85	Ease economic sanction, boycott, or embargo
Rhetorical	Negative	Military	62	Cooperate militarily
Rhetorical	Negative	Military	87	De-escalate military engagement, not specified below

TYPE	TONE	CATEGORY	CAMEO CODE	CAMEO DESCRIPTION
Rhetorical	Negative	Military	872	Ease military blockade
Rhetorical	Negative	Military	151	Increase military alert status
Rhetorical	Negative	Military	155	Mobilize or increase cyber-forces
Factual	Positive/Neutral	Diplomatic	1041	Demand leadership change
Factual	Positive/Neutral	Diplomatic	131	Threaten non-force, not specified below
Factual	Positive/Neutral	Diplomatic	1122	Accuse of human rights abuses
Factual	Positive/Neutral	Economic	1011	Demand economic cooperation
Factual	Positive/Neutral	Economic	1054	Demand easing of economic sanctions, boycott, or embargo
Factual	Positive/Neutral	Economic	1312	Threaten to boycott, embargo, or sanction
Factual	Positive/Neutral	Military	1056	Demand de-escalation of military engagement
Factual	Positive/Neutral	Military	138	Threaten with military force, not specified below
Factual	Positive/Neutral	Military	1384	Threaten conventional attack
Factual	Positive/Neutral	Military	1385	Threaten unconventional mass violence
Factual	Negative	Diplomatic	1223	Reject request for humanitarian aid
Factual	Negative	Diplomatic	129	Veto
Factual	Negative	Diplomatic	161	Reduce or break diplomatic relations
Factual	Negative	Diplomatic	1662	Expel or withdraw inspectors, observers
Factual	Negative	Economic	1211	Reject economic cooperation
Factual	Negative	Economic	1621	Reduce or stop economic assistance
Factual	Negative	Economic	163	Impose embargo, boycott, or sanctions
Factual	Negative	Military	1212	Reject military cooperation
Factual	Negative	Military	1622	Reduce or stop military assistance
Factual	Negative	Military	176	Attack cybernetically
Factual	Negative	Military	194	Fight with artillery and tanks
Factual	Negative	Military	196	Violate ceasefire

TABLE 1: CAMEO CODES

In 2015, we took a closer look at the Russian case in *From Assertiveness to Aggression*¹² and we also provided additional evidence on GPA in our 2015 *Strategic Monitor*¹³ report. Both studies used GDELT as one of the data sources. We already indicated then¹⁴ that we were exploring two additional new event datasets that had been made available that year: Lockheed Martin's ICEWS¹⁵ and the Open Event Data Alliance's¹⁶ Phoenix Data Project (PDP)¹⁷.

For this year's new study on great power assertiveness, we are in a position to use and compare the findings from these three datasets, all of which have been stored in our HCSS StratBase data warehouse. HCSS this year also conducted an 'audit' of all three of these in which we looked more closely 'under the hood' of these systems¹⁸. This audit revealed some of the main differences in how these three datasets are being collected as well as what their respective strengths and weaknesses are. Our own conclusion from this audit is that we from now on intend to – as we will start doing in this report – track and use all three datasets in search of 'robust' findings: findings that at least 2 out of the three datasets tend to agree on. In our assessment, GDELT's uniquely rich coverage of various media sources yields – when treated with appropriate care¹⁹ – unique near-real-time insights into both the day-to-day churn of international interactions, and also into certain anomalies that students of international affairs should pay

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- 12 Stephan De Spiegeleire, *From Assertiveness to Aggression: 2014 as a Watershed Year for Russian Foreign and Security Policy* (The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies, 2015)
 - 13 Tim Sweijs et al., *Strategic Monitor 2015: The Return of Ghosts Hoped Past? Global Trends in Conflict and Cooperation* (The Hague, The Netherlands: The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies, 2015)
 - 14 Tim Sweijs et al., *Strategic Monitor 2015: The Return of Ghosts Hoped Past? Global Trends in Conflict and Cooperation* (The Hague, The Netherlands: The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies, 2015).p. 47, footnote 62.
 - 15 Lockheed Martin, "World-Wide Integrated Crisis Early Warning System · Lockheed Martin," *Lockheed Martin*, December 2013, <http://www.lockheedmartin.com/us/products/W-ICEWS.html>
 - 16 Open Event Data Alliance, "Open Event Data Alliance," *Open Event Data Alliance*, July 2014, <http://openeventdata.org/#about>
 - 17 Philip A. Schrodt, "Phoenix Event Data Set Documentation," February 6, 2014, <http://openeventdata.org/datasets/phoenix/Phoenix.documentation.pdf>
 - 18 Stephan De Spiegeleire and Hannes Rõös, "Event Data Comparison," *HCSS StratBase*, January 3, 2016, <http://www.stratbase.org/index.php/portfolio-2/events-data-comparison>. We also tried to assess the validity of the datasets against some widely used datasets in international conflict, but the enormous differences in granularity made it difficult to come to any definitive conclusions.
 - 19 One of the important issues with GDELT is the 'dynamic' nature of its crawling process, which means that the reported events are extracted from an increasing number of media publications, leading to a visible 'inflation' of reported events. In this report, we have used various ways to 'normalize' the reported events from the full GDELT dataset, and we have also created a more 'stable' version of GDELT that is based on a 'stable' set of sources.

attention to. ICEWS, as a more ‘stable’ and curated data source based on uniquely rich human-generated dictionaries, provides a useful robustness-check for GDELT’s findings for the time period for which it is available (always with a one-year delay). But both of these datasets still suffer from different degrees of opacity, which make it virtually impossible to truly double-check them the way we would like to. We continue to pin great hopes on Phoenix, as the most transparent and (potentially) rigorous of the three datasets. But we also had to conclude that its current stage of development (and the more limited time period it covers) still prevents us from relying solely on it. Above all, as in all of the previous reports in which we have used event-data, we still feel that these should be complemented with other, more traditional, datasets. This then is the approach we will follow in this report.

Alongside the event datasets, HCSS is also building a larger number of more traditional ‘country-year’ indicators into our StratBase data warehouse²⁰. This year, we added the following indicators:

- *key weapon systems* that could be interpreted as representing potential instruments of military assertiveness²¹. (from the London-based International Institute for Strategic Studies’ *Military Balance*)²². We opted for: 4th and 5th generation tactical aircraft; aircraft carriers; attack helicopters; attack/guided missile submarines; bomber aircraft; cruisers/destroyers; frigates; heavy unmanned aerial vehicles; intercontinental ballistic missiles; modern armored infantry modern combat vehicles; modern main battle tanks; nuclear powered submarines; principal amphibious ships and tankers/multi-role tankers;

²⁰ Altogether, we now have about 250 indicators in our StratBase data warehouse.

²¹ Analysts may (and do) differ in the degree to which they would qualify a certain weapon system as reflecting ‘assertiveness’. HCSS has made an - admittedly subjective - choice for the types of systems that can be (and are) used to ‘project power’ in various parts of the world. We stress that this categorization need not entail a normative or moral judgment about the desirability or acceptability of such systems: there may be perfectly valid reasons to employ such systems in ways that may actually enhance international security. But we would still submit that their essence reflects an attempt - for better and/or for worse - to ‘assert’ one’s power in the international system. The same caveat applies to the other indicators in this list.

²² The International Institute of Strategic Studies (IISS), *The Military Balance 2011* (Routledge, 2011); The International Institute of Strategic Studies (IISS), *The Military Balance 2012* (Routledge, 2012); The International Institute of Strategic Studies (IISS), *The Military Balance 2013* (Routledge, 2013); The International Institute of Strategic Studies (IISS), *The Military Balance 2014* (Taylor & Francis, 2014); The International Institute of Strategic Studies (IISS), *The Military Balance 2015* (Taylor & Francis, 2015).

- *troops deployed abroad* as a reflection of a country's actual assertion of power outside of its own national jurisdiction (also from IISS *Military Balance*);
- *military expenditures* as a leading indicator of a country's potential future military assertiveness (from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute's *Arms Transfers Database*²³);
- *military personnel* – both in absolute terms and also normalized as a % of that country's labor force, as an indication of the amount of people a country is willing to 'free up' for future offensive or defensive military purposes (from the World Bank's *World Development Indicators*²⁴);
- development/use of *drones* for military purposes (from New America's *World of Drones*²⁵) as an indication (alongside other ones like manned armed aircraft) of a country's willingness to contemplate such 'new' forms or airborne power assertion;
- *foreign direct investment* net outflows as an indicator of a country's economic 'power projection' (also from the World Bank's *World Development Indicators*²⁶);
- *veto*es issued in the United Nations Security Council (from the UN's Dag Hammarskjöld Library *Research Guides*²⁷) as a reflection of the willingness of a few selected great powers to assert (or usurp) their unique position in the United Nations against the will of the majority of the rest of the international community powers.

23 Stockholm International Peace Research Institute/Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), "SIPRI Arms Transfers Database," Page, accessed January 12, 2016, <http://www.sipri.org/databases/armstransfers>

24 World Bank, "World Development Indicators - Armed Forces Personnel," 2015, <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/MS.MIL.TOTL.P1>

25 New America, "World of Drones," 2015, <http://securitydata.newamerica.net/world-drones.html>

26 World Bank, "World Development Indicators - Armed Forces Personnel."

27 Joëlle Sciboz, "Research Guides: Security Council - Quick Links: Vetoes," research starter, accessed January 12, 2016, <http://research.un.org/en/docs/sc/quick>

Given the critical importance of great power behavior to international relations²⁸, HCSS feels it is important for strategic decision-makers in the public and private sectors alike to have a better way of monitoring overall trends in this space. To the best of our knowledge, there is no equivalent effort in the public domain. We therefore intend to keep enhancing the evidentiary base that we use for our analyses, even if each of these datasets still remains decidedly imperfect²⁹.

The resulting evidence that we will present in this report is therefore quite dense and rich. We make ample use of various forms of visualization to facilitate the absorption of the information we will report on. We also limit ourselves to broad-stroke description of what these datasets show. There are myriad fascinating subplots ‘hidden’ in these datasets that could (and should) be further explored. Our main ambition in this report, however, is merely to provide a panoramic overview of the ‘big picture’ of great power assertiveness.

28 On the disproportionate importance of big powers to international relations, see Stephan De Spiegeleire et al., *Assessing Assertions of Assertiveness: The Chinese and Russian Cases* (The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies, 2014), <http://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=tnRQBAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PP1&dq=GDELT+event+extraction&ots=YFUmqFXoip&sig=YgtluPp54R6V2NM5UULWW6beYxo.>, pp. 7-11.

29 The data that will be presented here aim to paint a picture of the assertiveness of selected great powers that is as ‘objective’ as possible. Whether it is or is not an accurate reflection of actual events is virtually impossible to assess. *First* of all, the event datasets we are using here show reported events and not actual events. We really have no reliable means to assess the external validity of these data. We hasten to add that this is not dissimilar to the fact that we are unable to assess to what extent the GDP data that are widely used in the field of economics actually reflect a country’s ‘real’ economic activity. Given that these datasets are ubiquitous in economic analysis; we think there is a strong case to start doing the same in the field of international security. *Secondly*, the three different event datasets embody different approaches to extracting events from media sources and - consequently - disagree on the assertiveness trends. We suspect that every one of these datasets reflects a certain part of ‘reality’. But we know that every single one of them is distinctly imperfect in what it tries to reflect. We also know that the ‘big picture’ is broader than the sum of these parts. We hope (and trust) that the open source nature of these datasets will allow the community to further improve their accuracy. *Thirdly*, also the other (non-event-based) indicators we use in our report are imperfect, mostly due to the notorious difficulty in independently ascertaining actual (as opposed to reported) military holdings or arms exports. Bearing all of these caveats in mind, however, we still come out on the side of ‘evidence’ as opposed to ‘anecdotes’.

2 TRENDS IN GLOBAL ASSERTIVENESS

The headlines in our news media constantly bombard us with stories suggesting that the great powers – especially China and Russia – are becoming more assertive, especially in the ‘negatively assertive’ sense. What does the broader and finer-tuned evidence base that we are now able to consult tell us about this? Let us first take a look at overall global assertiveness before zooming in on the great powers themselves

2.1 GLOBAL ASSERTIVENESS

Figure 3 shows the cumulative sum of all factually assertive events³⁰ that were reported in the past three years (from January 1, 2013 through December 31, 2015) for all countries based on both the GDELT and ICEWS datasets. The raw data are normalized here as the percentage they represent as a proportion of all reported events for that time unit.

This visual nicely illustrates why global assertiveness deserves our attention. The first striking observation is that in both GDELT and ICEWS factual negative military assertiveness – the top right segment in the visual – scores higher than any other form of factual assertiveness. The second disconcerting observation lies in the robust increases both GDELT and ICEWS show for that factual negative military type of assertiveness. Finally, we also see the positive economic forms of assertiveness declining in both datasets. These findings therefore suggest that the world as a whole is becoming more negatively assertive in precisely the two factual categories that have most impact on many people’s daily lives.

³⁰ Whenever we use the word ‘events’ here to refer to the data from the event datasets, we are really talking about ‘reported’ events. These data have also been normalized over the entire dataset - so what is being shown here is the percentage assertive events represent out of all events that were extracted for that time unit (in this case, day by day).

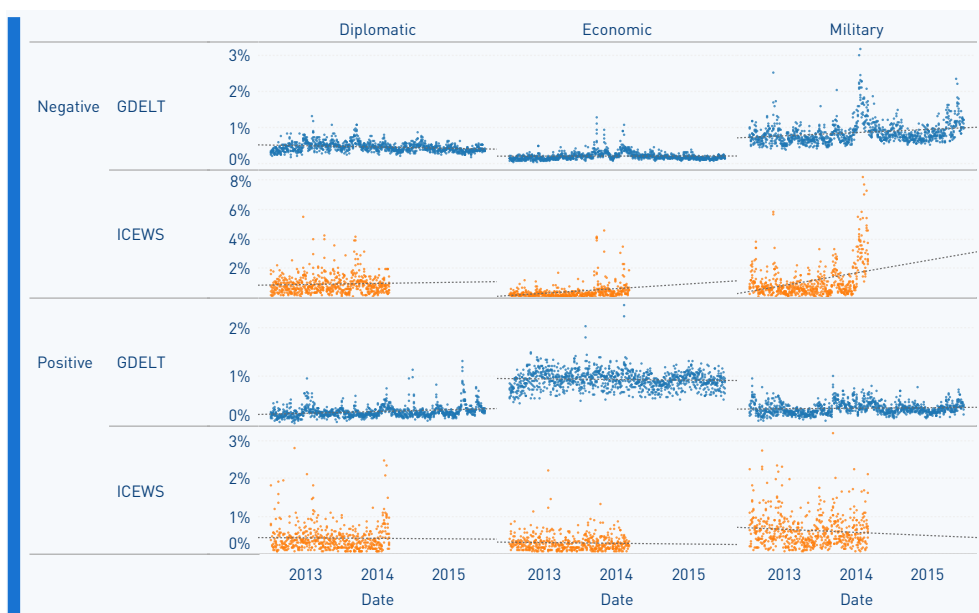


FIGURE 3: FACTUAL GLOBAL ASSERTIVENESS BY CATEGORIES IN % OF REPORTED TOTAL, 01/2013-12/2015

When we look at the rhetoric behind these facts (Figure 4), we see a somewhat more encouraging picture. We observe that diplomatic assertiveness is by far the dominant category of assertiveness, for which positive events still outnumber negative ones, even if we see a robust downward trend in the positive category. Negative military assertiveness is visibly higher than its economic counterpart, but it appears to be declining a little. All this suggests, however, is that countries appear less shy to *act* assertively in areas that matter than they are to *talk* about it – a fairly meager consolation. Both datasets also show that (rhetorical) negative economic assertiveness is slightly declining.

2.2 GREAT POWER ASSERTIVENESS – OVERALL

What does the picture look like when we zoom in on the great powers as a group? The next figures show the cumulative assertiveness of the 5 selected great powers as a group, displayed as a percentage of the global assertiveness of all countries. If we look at these data from 1979 to date, we see that the share of great-power-assertiveness in all-country-assertiveness has increased from around 35% in 1979 to about 55% in 2015. On the one hand, this means that these 4 countries plus the

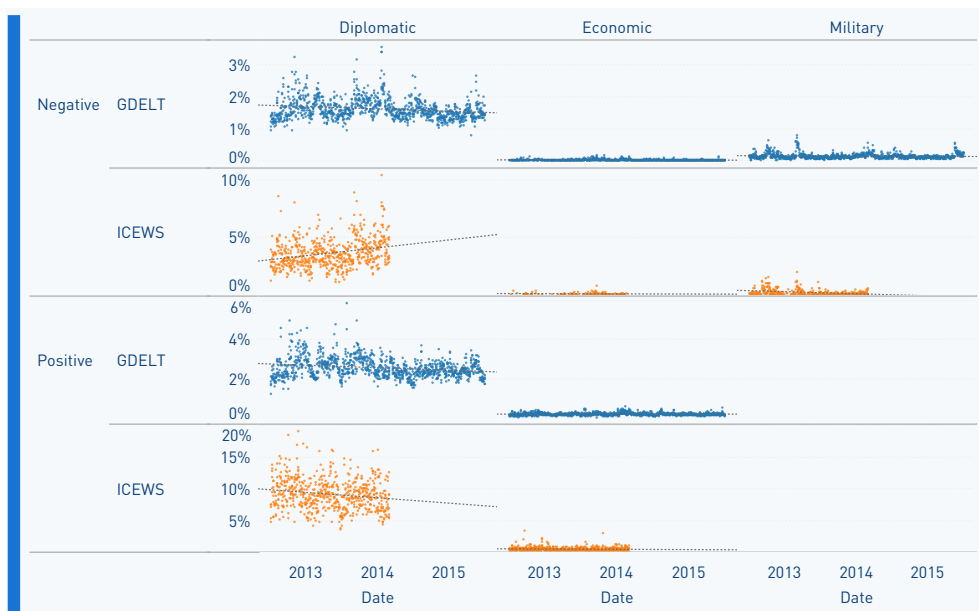


FIGURE 4: RHETORIC GLOBAL ASSERTIVENESS BY CATEGORIES IN % OF REPORTED TOTAL, 01/2013-12/2015

European Union together account for over half of all assertive events in the world's 239 countries. On the other hand, though, we should put that figure in perspective: those very same great powers also represent 46% of the world population (in 2015). So whereas their per capita assertiveness does appear to be higher than that of non-great powers, the latter still account of a considerable amount of assertiveness as well. Within this time series, the period 2013-2015 still show an upward trendline – from around 50% to 55%.

Turning our attention to the breakdown in the different types of assertiveness we observe that also for the great powers as a group, diplomatic events – both positive and negative – are dominant, with a noticeable increase in the positive category over the entire period. But we also find that the negative military category is one of the fastest growing ones – and especially in the past few years. On a more encouraging note, the positive economic category also increased notably in this same period – even though it remains at a lower level than the negative military one.

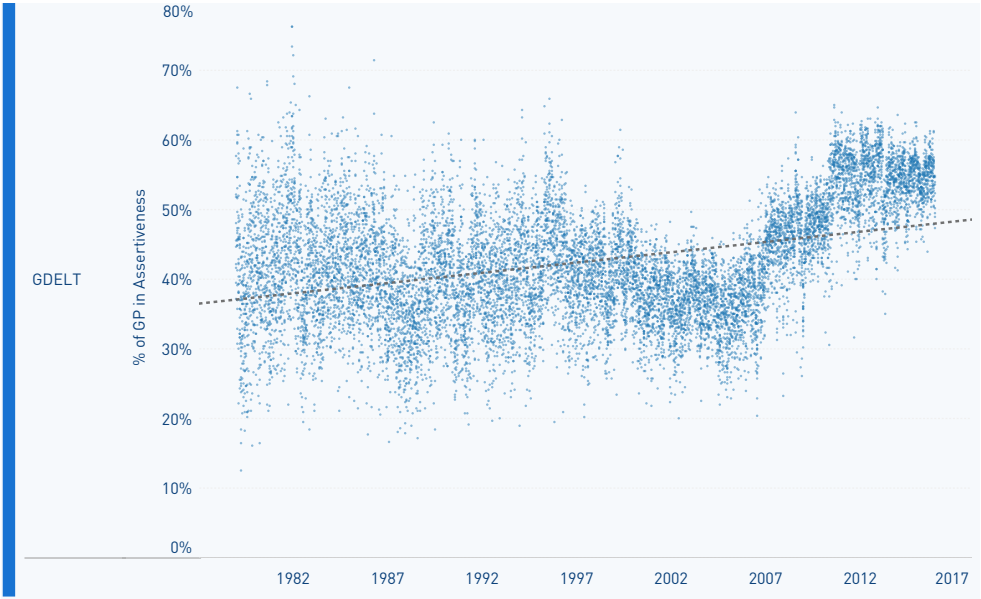


FIGURE 5 :OVERALL GREAT POWERS ASSERTIVENESS IN % OF REPORTED FOR ALL COUNTRIES, 1979-TO DATE



FIGURE 6: OVERALL GREAT POWERS ASSERTIVENESS BY CATEGORIES IN % OF REPORTED FOR ALL COUNTRIES, 1979-TO DATE

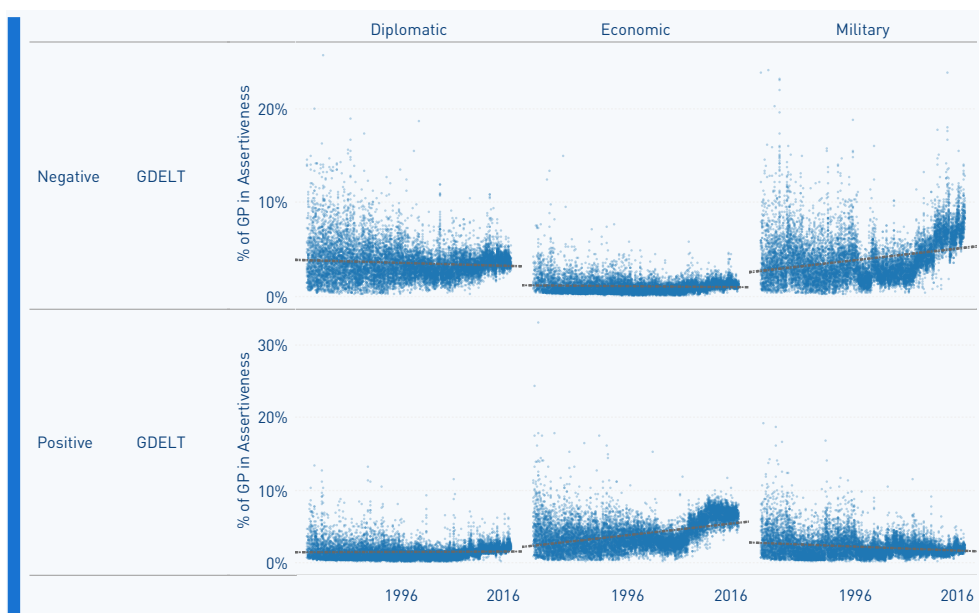


FIGURE 7: FACTUAL GREAT POWERS ASSERTIVENESS BY CATEGORIES IN % OF REPORTED FOR ALL COUNTRIES, 1979-TO DATE

When we just single out the ‘factual’ subset of these figures (Figure 7), the increase in great power military (negative) assertiveness stands out even more strikingly. It now becomes the dominant category of the 6 ones that we visualize here – at an even higher level than in the Cold War period.

The next visual shows the trends on the other (non-event) indicators for the entire group of great powers (minus the European Union and its member states³¹) since 2000, with a special focus on the military indicators.

31 In this year’s report, HCSS has excluded the European Union and its respective member states from these datasets, partially because we are still working on them; partially because it remains difficult to attribute, for instance, French or Swedish arms sales or weapon holdings to the European Union per se. Future iterations of this work might still include them across the board

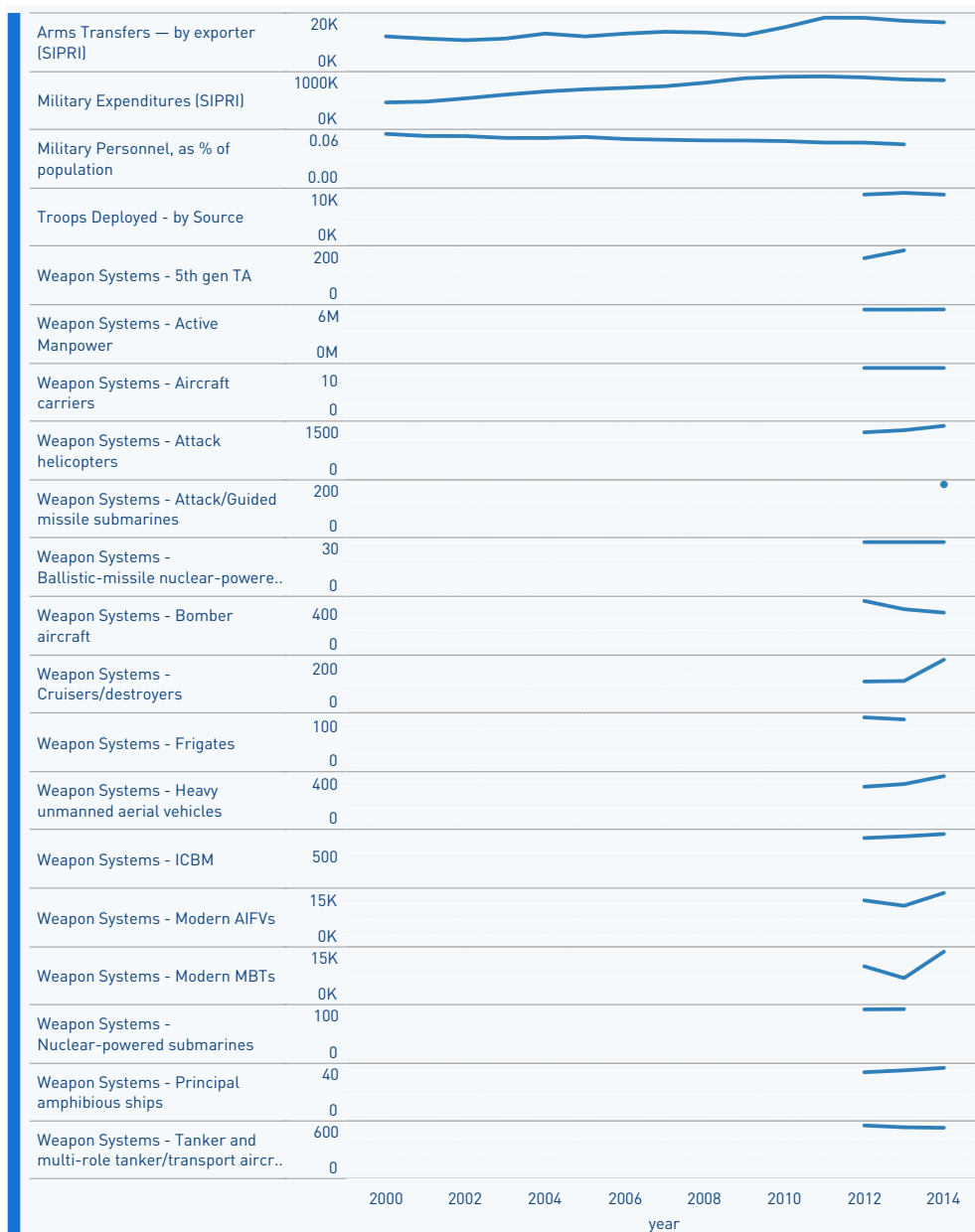


FIGURE 8: MILITARY ASSERTIVENESS INDICATORS FOR GREAT POWERS (EXCLUDING THE EUROPEAN UNION AND ITS MEMBER STATES), 2000-2014

As we see, the picture on the military non-event-side is more differentiated than the event datasets suggest. Overall arms exports by great powers, which had stayed fairly even in the first decade of this century but had then picked up in 2009 and 2010, have slightly declined since then. They still stay higher than they were during the noughties, but remain significantly lower than during the Cold War. [We will see in subsequent sections that this picture hides some interesting differences between the Great Powers.] In this year's monitor, we are not (yet) including the different European 'Middle Powers', although they do still rank quite high on at least some of these indicators – arms exports being one of those.

When we take a look at military expenditures, we see that after a significant drop in the post-Cold War period, they showed a steady increase in the first decade of this century. They have since stabilized and even declined somewhat in recent years. Military personnel as percentage of the active labor force almost doubled in the immediate post-Cold War (1989-1997), but it then started gradually declining. 2013 was the lowest year for this indicators since 1992.

For the other indicators, our dataset is limited to the past few years. Great powers deployed significantly fewer troops in 2013 than in 2012 (from 330k to 280k). In 2014, that trend was reversed somewhat (to 285k) but still remained significantly lower than in 2013. We will see that the US military drawdown plays a significant role in this trend.

The various weapon systems that we selected also show a mixed picture. We see fairly sizeable increases in overall number of 4th and 5th generation aircraft; attack helicopters, cruisers/destroyers; heavy unmanned aerial vehicles, modern AIFVs, main battle tanks (they were still declining in 2012, but then increased significantly in 2013) and principal amphibious ships. We see declines in bomber aircraft, frigates and in tankers/mixed tanker-transport aircraft. Other categories either increased slightly or stayed even.

When we add all of this up, we find that the great powers as a group prove to be more assertive than all other countries, but not by as much as than one might expect. Our event datasets show that the negative military category of GP assertive events is growing worryingly quickly. The factual subset of this even

proves to be the biggest category of all categories we report on – bigger than the diplomatic ones. Our other datasets do not really reflect the major spikes in aggregate great power assertiveness that pundits seem to assume. The interesting question here is whether this looks different when we zoom in on the individual Great Powers: may the problem not lie with the great powers as a group, but just with a few of them? We address that question in the next section.

2.3 GREAT POWER ASSERTIVENESS – ONE BY ONE

The visuals in this section present the different types of assertiveness – factual and rhetorical; positive and negative; and diplomatic, economic and military – over time on a day-by-day basis for the period of January 1, 2013-December 31, 2015. Time is shown on the x-axis. The y-axis shows the normalized assertiveness data for that great power: the number of reported assertive events for that country as a percentage of the overall amount of events for that same time unit.

CHINA

In our previous 2014 report on Chinese and Russian assertiveness, we pointed out that China's assertiveness had increased quite precipitously over the past few decades. It had started from a much lower level of assertiveness in the late 70s, but its reported assertiveness then almost doubled in the next 35 years. Events in the South China Sea over these past few years certainly have been well covered in the global press – albeit of course significantly more in Asia than in Europe or in the US. But if those are the tips of the iceberg, what do our broader data tell us about the underlying parts of the Chinese assertiveness iceberg?

The following visuals extend the analysis from our previous report to the period 2013-2015. They paint a more differentiated picture than we were able to show then. Figure 9 shows Chinese factual assertiveness in the different categories we track – both positive and negative; and also diplomatic, economic, and military. Both GDELT and ICEWS show a consistent downward trend in factual Chinese assertiveness in the diplomatic and economic realms in the past two years – which is a part of the bigger story that the headlines might indeed have downplayed. These data throw an interesting light on the active ongoing scholarly discussion about Chinese assertiveness, whereby some China experts

still assert that China is behaving more assertively across the board³²; whereas other adduce some countervailing evidence that points in a different direction³³.

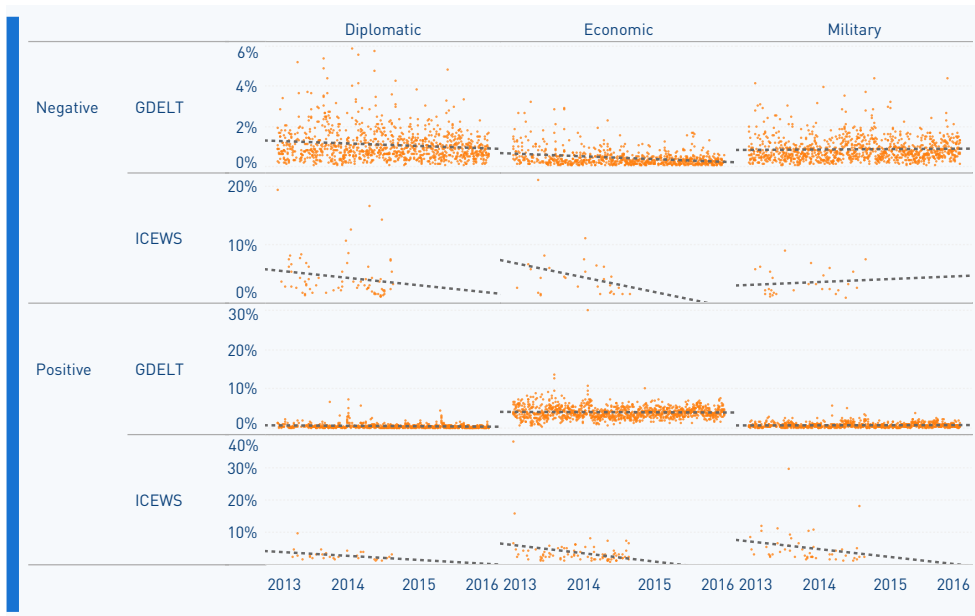


FIGURE 9: CHINESE FACTUAL ASSERTIVENESS BY CATEGORIES IN % OF REPORTED TOTAL, 2013-2015

When we just look at the military realm, however, both datasets point to an upward trend in both positive and negative assertive behavior (with ICEWS – surprisingly – identifying a much smaller amount of Chinese factual military assertive). Both also show positive military events as declining – which points to trouble for China’s neighbors and the world as a whole.

- 32 Michael D. Swaine, “Perceptions of an Assertive China,” *China Leadership Monitor* 32, no. 2 (2010): 1–19; Andrew Scobell and Scott W. Harold, “An ‘assertive’ China? Insights from Interviews,” *Asian Security* 9, no. 2 (2013): 111–31; Alastair Iain Johnston, “How New and Assertive Is China’s New Assertiveness?” *International Security* 37, no. 4 (2013): 7–48
- 33 Alastair Iain Johnston, “Stability and Instability in Sino–US Relations: A Response to Yan Xuetong’s Superficial Friendship Theory,” *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 4, no. 1 (2011): 5–29; Michael D. Swaine and M. Taylor Fravel, “China’s Assertive Behavior—Part Two: The Maritime Periphery,” 2011, <http://dspace.mit.edu/handle/1721.1/71259>; Michael D. Swaine, “China’s Assertive Behavior—Part One: On ‘Core Interests,’” *China Leadership Monitor* 34, no. 22 (2011): 1–25; Xuetong Yan, “The Instability of China–Us Relations,” *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 3, no. 3 (2010): 263–92; Dingding Chen, Xiaoyu Pu, and Alastair Iain Johnston, “Debating China’s Assertiveness,” 2014, http://www.mitpressjournals.org/doi/pdf/10.1162/ISEC_c_00151

What do our other indicators show for China?

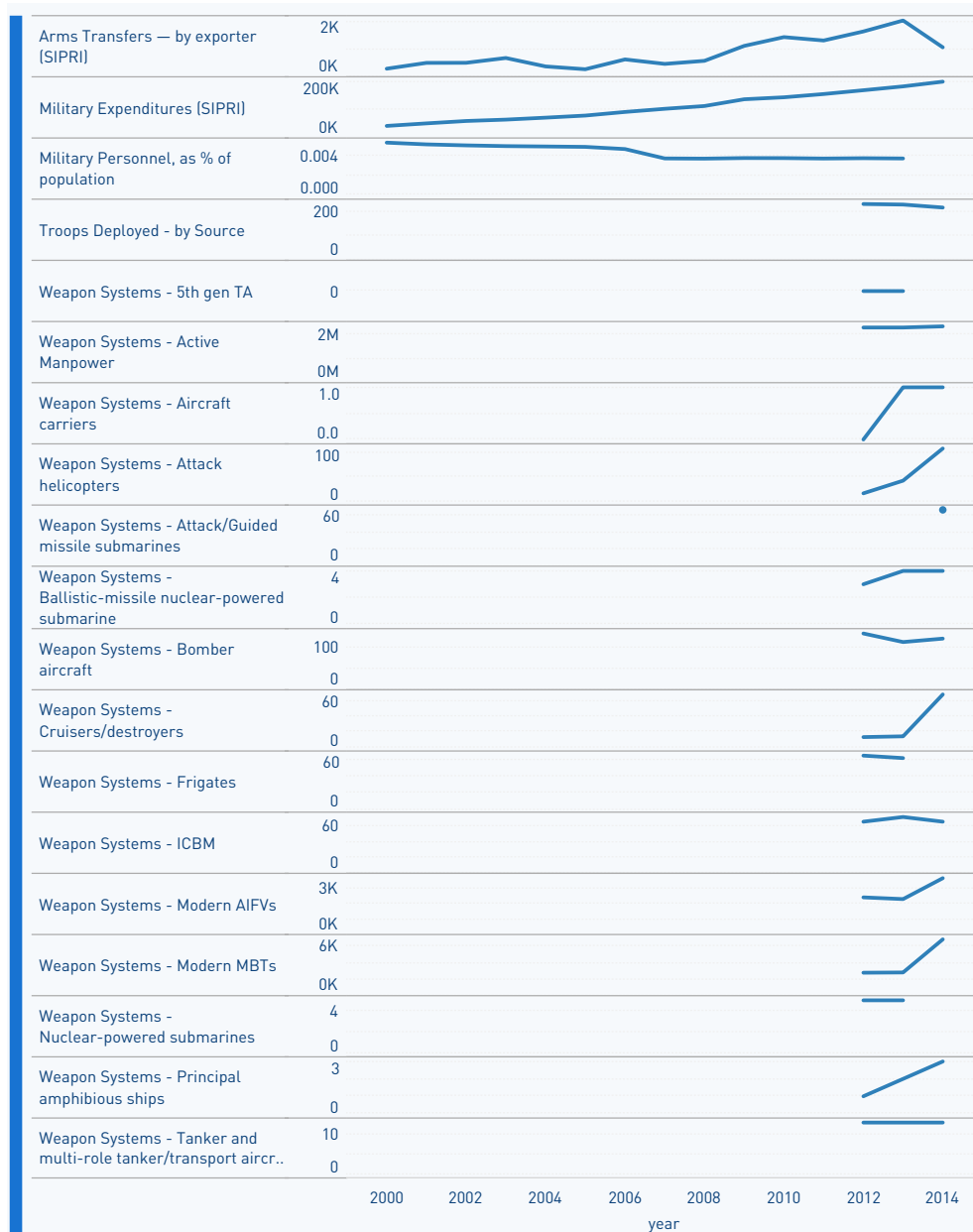


FIGURE 10: MILITARY ASSERTIVENESS INDICATORS FOR CHINA, 2000-2014

Even a cursory glance at the figures explains why so many experts are so concerned about recent Chinese trends – again especially in the military realm. Foreign military arms transfers from China increased steadily from 2005 until 2013 (by more than 700%) before reversing somewhat in 2014. The Chinese figures also show a steady but dramatic increase in military expenditures throughout the reported period, during which they increased more than fourfold. The overall amount of active manpower available to the PLA keeps increasing slightly, although the percentage of military personnel in the overall population has decreased slightly over time (from around 0.05% to 0.04%). The number of Chinese troops deployed abroad stayed remarkably low and even declined from 1815 in 2013 to 1718 in 2014. The various key weapon systems we selected show some quite troubling trends, especially in 2014, when Chinese reported holdings of 4th generation tactical aircraft increased by almost 50% in one year (from 913 to 1817); they acquired an aircraft carrier in 2013; their numbers of attack helicopters increased almost 7-fold and of cruisers/destroyers over 5-fold, modern AIFVs x 1.5, MBTs x 2.5, amphibious ships x 2.

Overall, we therefore conclude that China does indeed exhibit multiple symptoms of what we would call ‘acute assertivitis’. By this we mean – in analogy to diseases like bronchitis³⁴ – the pathological, excessive and (therefore) dangerous manifestation of increased stated and/or revealed forms of assertiveness.

‘EUROPE’

Europe remains the ‘odd man out’ amongst these ‘great powers’. Figure 11, which shows the different forms of European factual assertiveness in both datasets, reveals that from an already low base Europe is becoming even less factually assertive in the negative sense both diplomatically and militarily³⁵. The only exception here is the economic realm, where Europe is increasingly flexing its muscles especially (but not exclusively) with respect to Russia.

34 -itis is a suffix used in pathological terms that denote inflammation of an organ (bronchitis; gastritis; neuritis) and hence, in extended senses, nouns denoting abnormal states or conditions, excesses, tendencies, obsessions, etc. (telephonitis; baseballitis). Dictionary.com, “-Itis,” *Dictionary.com*, 2016, <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/-itis>

35 GDELT is the only dataset to have data for ‘Europe’.



FIGURE 11: EUROPEAN FACTUAL ASSERTIVENESS BY CATEGORIES IN % OF REPORTED TOTAL, 2010-2016

When we take a look at trends in European rhetorical assertiveness, we see levels that are surprisingly low given Europe’s declining but still very substantial economic and political weight in the world. Europe is visibly much more active in the economic realm, the one where it is still most dominant, than in the political and (even more strikingly) the military realms – even though it does appear to be asserting both its behavior and its rhetoric slightly. Diplomatically, things seem to be staying quite stable overall, although we do see more oscillations in 2014 (Russia) and late 2015 (Syria).

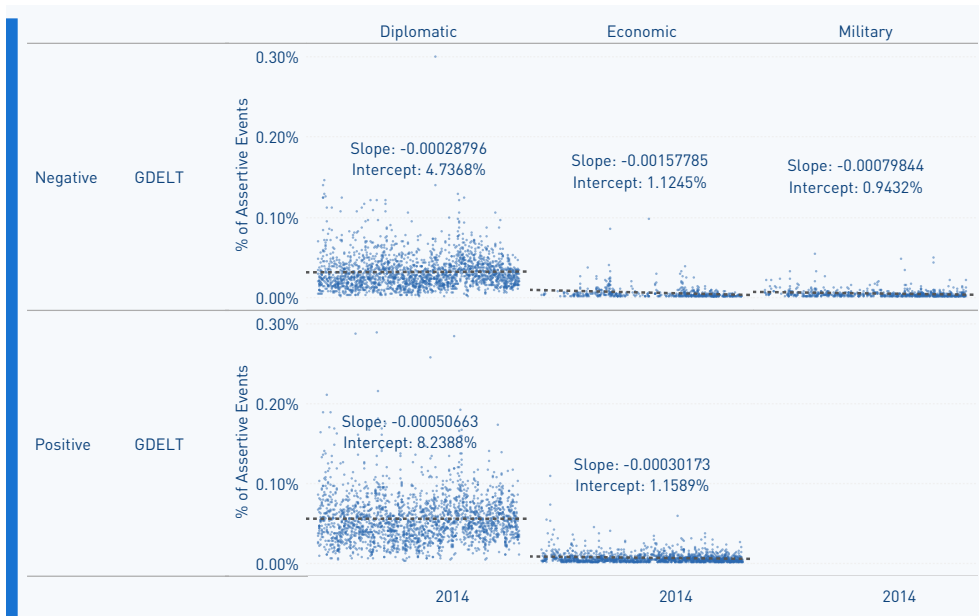


FIGURE 12: EUROPEAN RHETORICAL ASSERTIVENESS BY CATEGORIES IN % OF REPORTED TOTAL, 2010-2016

INDIA

The Indian ‘assertiveness’ story is one that certainly Europeans – but also most other non-Indians (other than some Chinese and/or Pakistani experts) – are much less familiar with. Some analysts have started claiming that India has also entered an era of ‘assertive government’³⁶ since the overwhelming election victory of the nationalist BJP party’s Narendra Modi in May 2014. When we take a look at our two datasets, however, we do not (yet?) see this claim born out in the figures for the reported events. GDELT shows Indian both positive and negative factual assertiveness in the diplomatic, economic and military arenas as declining. Only ICEWS, whose publicly available data stop shortly after the BJP election victory, shows a diplomatically and militarily slightly more assertive India in terms of its behavior (although the number of reported events in this category is quite low). We also observe more military and diplomatic events (and few economic ones) in the negative category, whereas in the positive category we find many economic reported events.

36 Hailin Ye, “India’s Policy Towards China Under the Mindset of ‘Assertive Government,’” in *Annual Report on the Development of the Indian Ocean Region (2015)* (Springer, 2016), 33–46, http://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-981-10-0167-3_2.

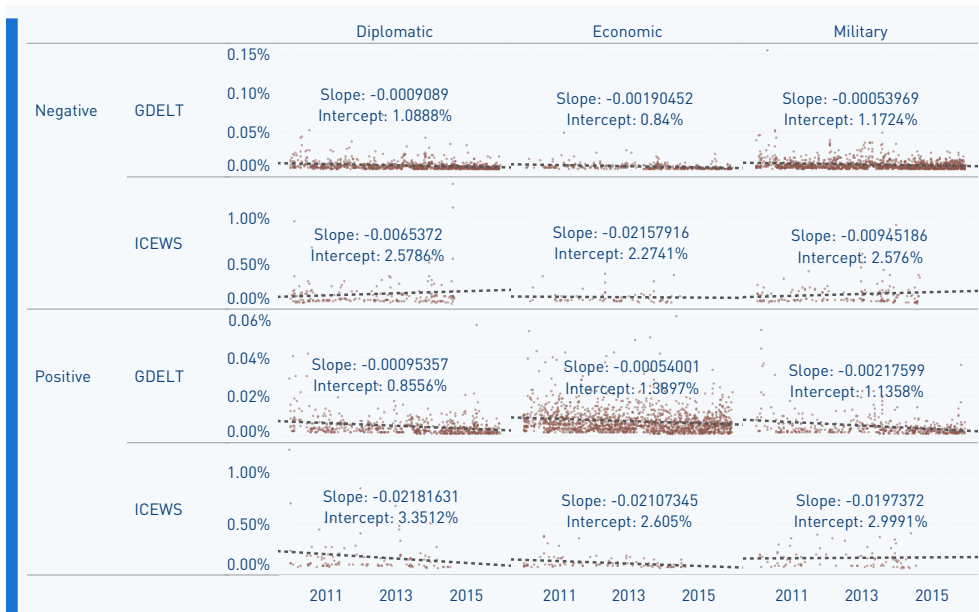


FIGURE 13: INDIAN FACTUAL ASSERTIVENESS BY CATEGORIES IN % OF REPORTED TOTAL, 2010-2016

We detect a similar story when we look at the rhetorical side of Indian assertiveness. Both datasets show a mostly diplomatically active India with low and declining levels of rhetorical assertiveness. Only ICEWS shows more positive diplomatic assertiveness, which reinforces the positive picture that emerges out of these rhetorical events. In the economic realm, we find an India that is more positively than negatively assertive and for which both of these forms of assertiveness are declining – except for ICEWS which again reports the positive forms of verbal economic assertiveness as slightly increasing. The military data show the opposite: here India is only negatively assertive (there are no recorded events of a positive military nature), but with a declining trend in both ICEWS and GDELT.

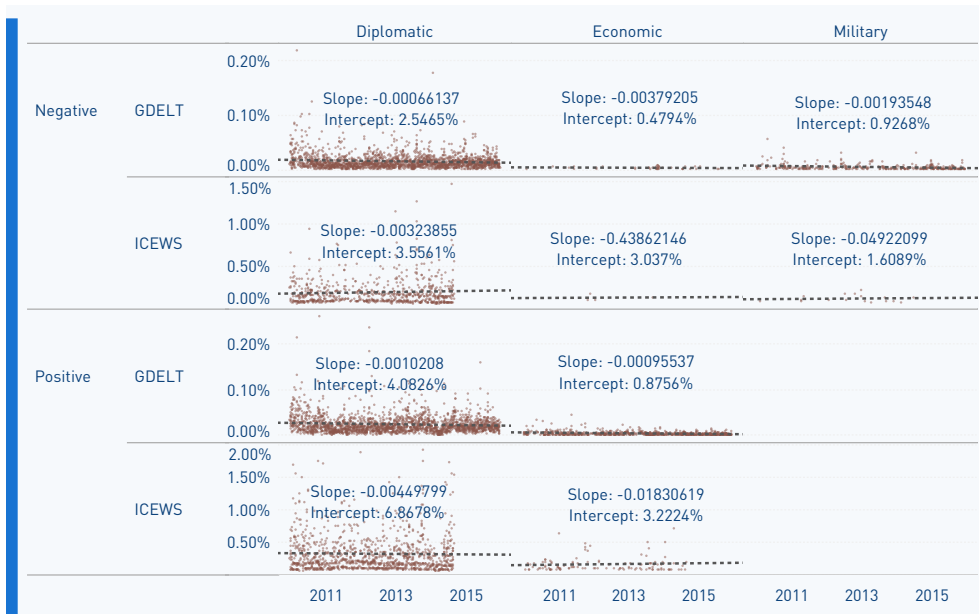


FIGURE 14: INDIAN RHETORICAL ASSERTIVENESS BY CATEGORIES IN % OF REPORTED TOTAL, 2010-2016

We therefore draw the conclusion that India, based on the GDELT and ICEWS event datasets, remains, not unlike Europe, a globally fairly low-profile great power with small and – generally – declining levels of negative assertiveness that is starting to exhibit more positive assertiveness. We also do not (yet?) see a noticeable bump in any these figures after the latest change of government.

The following figure show how India scores on the other indicators.

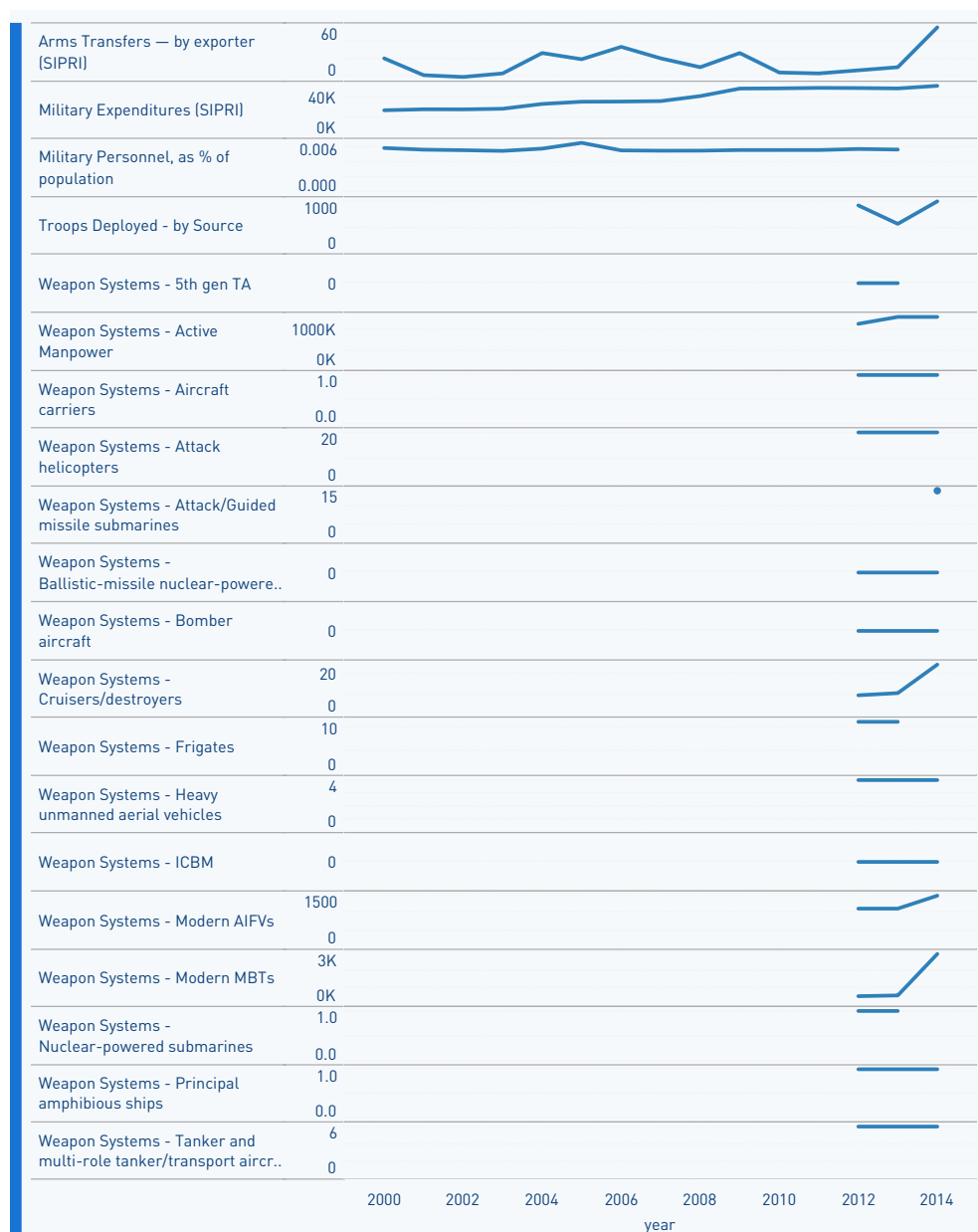


FIGURE 15: MILITARY ASSERTIVENESS INDICATORS FOR INDIA, 2000-2014

In this dataset, we note that 2014 does represent a trend reversal in a number of indicators for India. We see spikes in arms exports (x5), in FDI outflows (connected with economic reform), in the number of troops deployed abroad (x2), in the number of cruisers/destroyers (x2), in modern AIFVs (x1.3), modern MBTs (x4.7). We have to stress, however, that overall figures remain remarkably low for a country that size.

RUSSIA

Figure 16 shows the different types of factual assertiveness that Russia has displayed since 2010. We see that, contrary to India, for instance, Russia is quite active in all three areas – and especially so in the negative ones. If we zoom in on these negative types of factual assertiveness, we note that both GDEL and ICEWS reveal an increasingly militarily assertive Russia, with spikes during the Crimean annexation in March 2014, the initial combat activities in South-Eastern Ukraine in July 2014, and Russia's military intervention in the Syrian civil war from September 2015 onwards.

With respect to factual negative economic assertiveness, we see a few spikes at the time of the counter-sanctions that Russia issued in the summer of 2015 against the Western economic sanctions that were imposed by the majority of Western countries in response to the Russian invasion of Crimea and its presumed involvement in Ukraine's Donbass region.

We also detect, however, a few more positive glimmers of hope as in the positive trends in both positive economic and military events, although we strongly suspect that a deep-dive in these data would reveal that these are targeted at Russia's allies in what is increasingly being constructed as a zero-sum alliance game.



FIGURE 16: RUSSIAN FACTUAL ASSERTIVENESS BY CATEGORIES IN % OF REPORTED TOTAL, 2010-2016

A look at only the rhetorically assertive events paints a very different picture. Here we see a Russia that is primarily assertive in the diplomatic category. Both GDELT and ICEWS show Russia as being increasingly assertive in this category in the negative sense, and as being less so in the positive sense. As a result, we see a Russia that on both counts shows itself as being more dangerous. When it comes to economic and military forms of verbal assertiveness, however, we find that Russia is militarily more vocal in the negative sense, and economically more vocal in the positive sense. But in all cases, we see a Russia that speaks more softly than it acts.

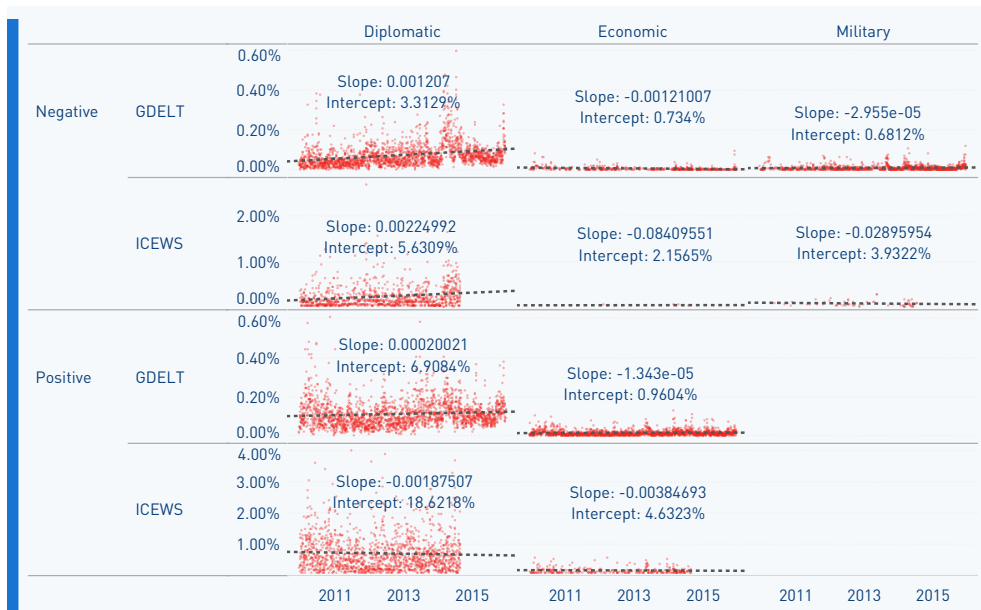


FIGURE 17: RUSSIAN RHETORICAL ASSERTIVENESS BY CATEGORIES IN % OF REPORTED TOTAL, 2010-2016

How do these findings relate to the more frequently used country/year indicators? The following visual shows the breakdown of these indicators for Russia.

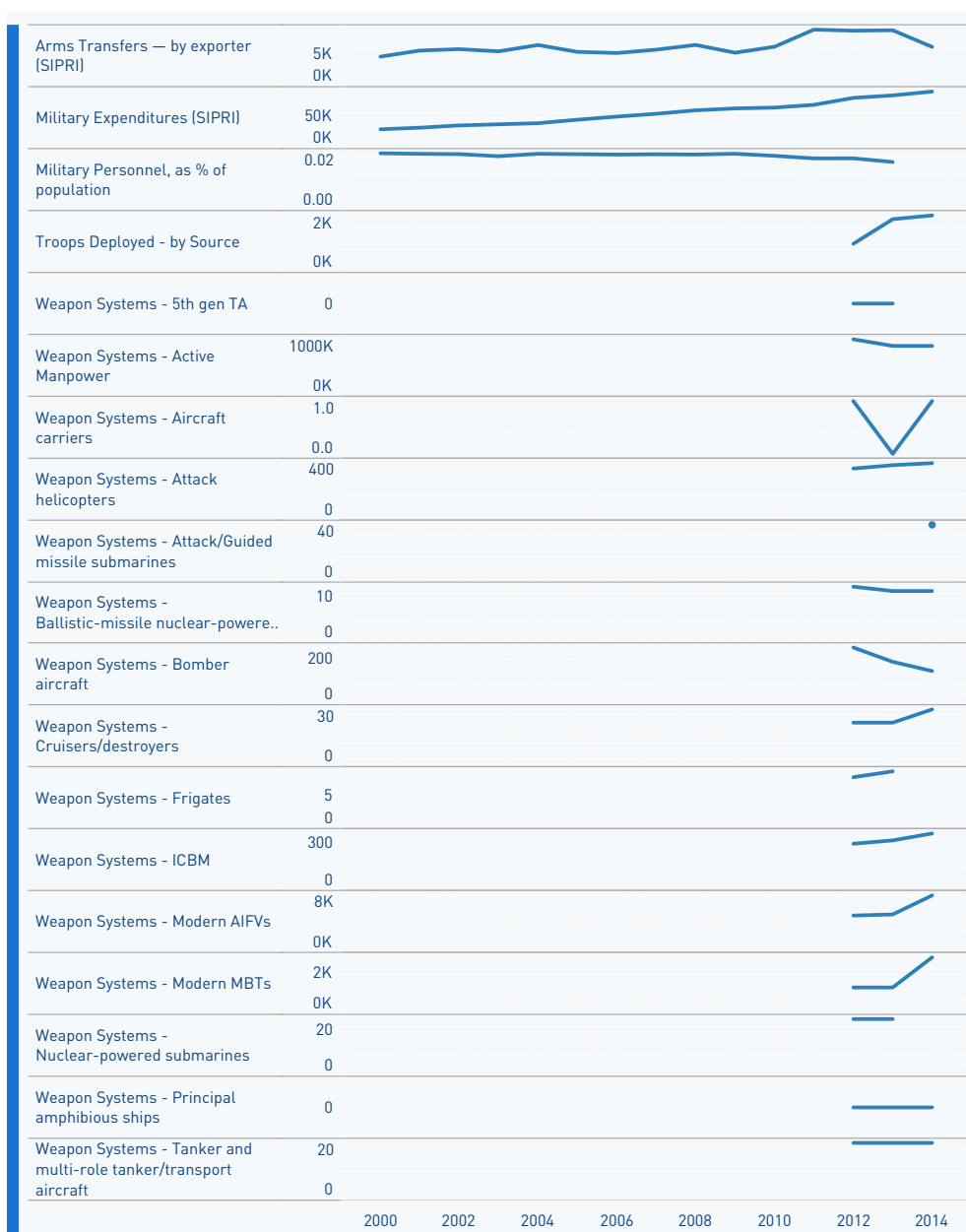


FIGURE 18: MILITARY ASSERTIVENESS INDICATORS FOR RUSSIA, 2000-2014

Russia's picture (maybe surprisingly) looks more mixed than China's. Its arms transfers did increase from 2009 to 2010, but in 2014 they went back to their 2010 level. Military expenditures have increased in nominal terms and also as a percentage of the GDP (which reached 4.1% in 2013). The amount of active manpower in the Russian armed forces as well as the percentage they represent vis-a-vis the overall population have declined numerically – albeit from an admittedly quite high level and also to make room for a smaller, but more professional force. There is a major increase in the amount of troops deployed abroad in 2013 (x1.7). We see fairly major increases in cruiser destroyers (x1.3); modern AIFVs (x1.5); MBTs (x2.1); and modest increases in attack helicopters (1.1%) and ICBMs (1.2%). As we documented in our 2015 report on Russia's transition from assertiveness to aggression³⁷, however, these datasets do not include the accelerated introduction of various weapon systems in 2014-15, nor the announced additional future increases.

We therefore conclude that also Russia, like China, is showing increasing signs of – in their case renewed – acute assertivitis. Given the fact that Russia shares a 2250 km border with Europe and is interconnected with it in all sorts of other ways, this is certainly a cause for concern.

37 De Spiegeleire, *From Assertiveness to Aggression*.

UNITED STATES

Let us now turn our attention to the last remaining superpower – the United States. Figure 19 shows that country’s different types of factual assertiveness.

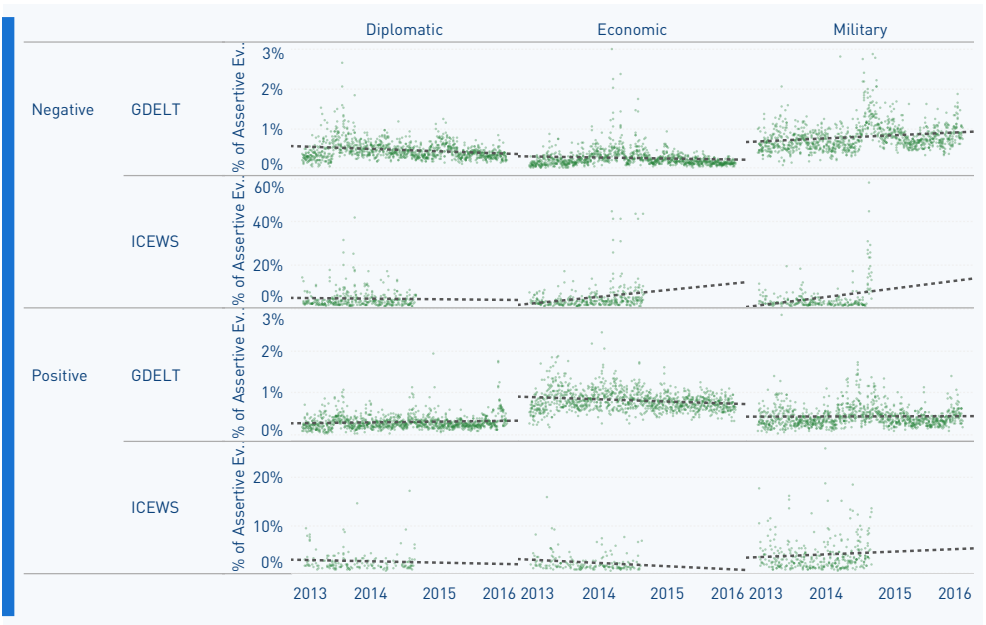


FIGURE 19: UNITED STATES’ FACTUAL ASSERTIVENESS BY CATEGORIES IN % OF REPORTED TOTAL, 2010-2016

We immediately note that ICEWS has significantly more reported events for the US than for any of the other great powers. Despite the fact that ICEWS made a more controlled attempt to diversify its media sources across different parts of the globe, this suggests that there might still be a coverage bias. If we look at the negative assertive events, we see that there are more reported events here in the military than in the diplomatic or economic categories. In the positive rows, we find that GDELT extracted significantly more economic events, whereas ICEWS also here found more military events. Both GDELT and ICEWS depict an increasingly militarily assertive US in these past 3 years. If we look at the trend since President Obama’s became president in 2008, however, we see that over the entire course of his 2 administrations, the level of assertiveness has actually declined.



FIGURE 20: UNITED STATES' RHETORICAL ASSERTIVENESS BY CATEGORIES IN % OF REPORTED TOTAL, 2010-2016

Figure 20 shows US' rhetorical assertiveness from 2010-2015, covering a good part of the two Obama administrations. We see that both datasets show an overall decline in negative military and economic rhetorical assertiveness – as we already pointed out probably the two most consequential sets of data in these datasets. Positive rhetoric is also shown to be declining in both datasets in the diplomatic and economic categories. In the past 2 years, however, especially factual military assertiveness has been increasing again.

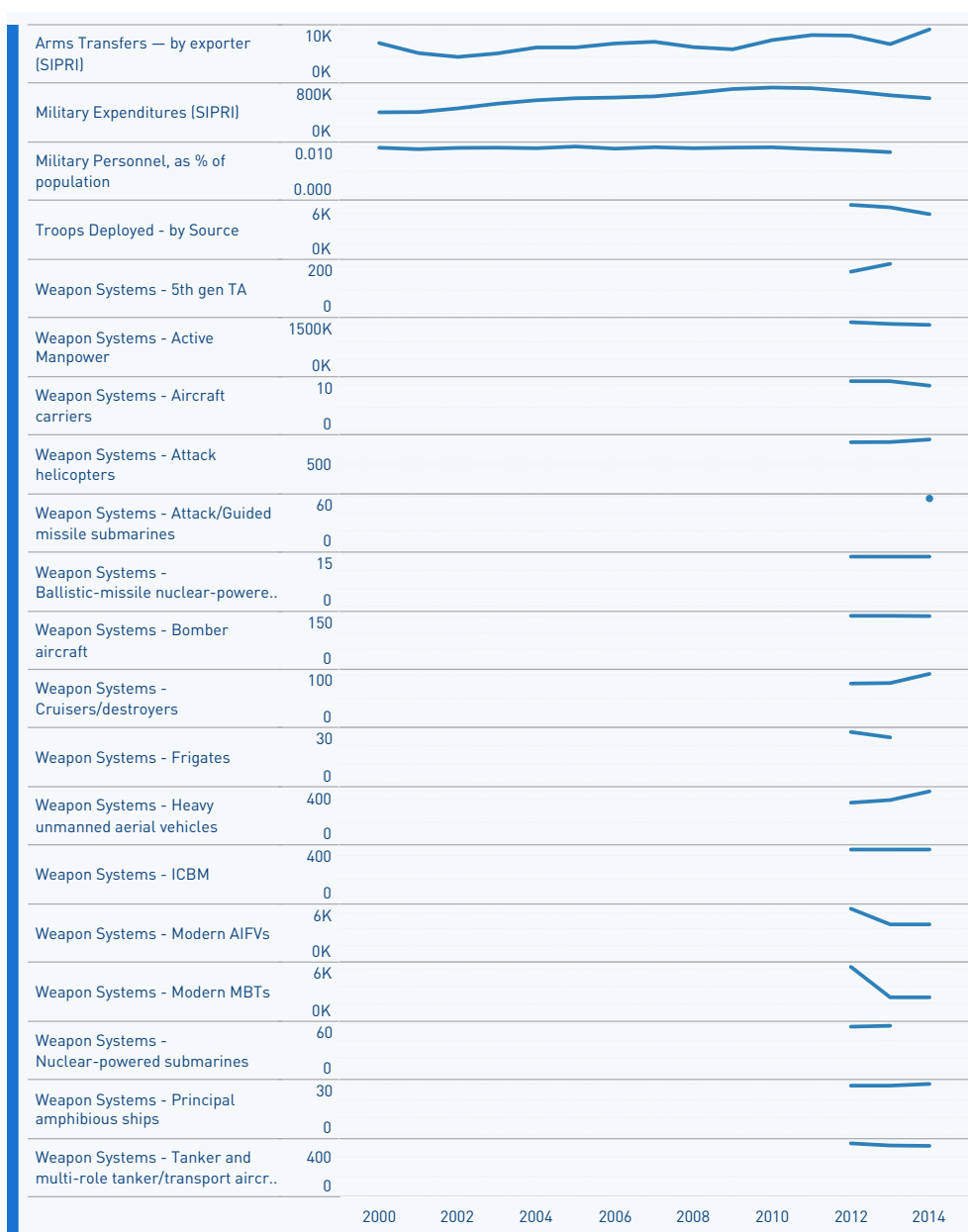


FIGURE 21: MILITARY ASSERTIVENESS INDICATORS FOR THE UNITED STATES, 2000-2014

For the US, we see a few downward trends in the data for the past few years (FDI outflows, military expenditures, military personnel as % of population, active manpower and troops deployed (-20%), aircraft carriers (from 11 to 10), frigates (-10%), AIFVs (-30%) and MBTs (-54%) but nothing that would allow us to conclude that the US armed forces would have been hollowed out under the Obama Administration. We actually also still see some increases in categories like 5th generation fighter aircraft (+18%); attack helicopters (+5%); cruisers/destroyers (+24) and heavy unmanned aerial vehicles (+26%).

Overall we are left with a record of a still quite active but less assertive US which has demonstrated more factual and rhetorical restraint during the last two administrations than in the past even though it remains as a comparatively higher level, as we will see when we now turn our attention to the comparison of the great powers.

2.4 GREAT POWER ASSERTIVENESS – COMPARED

Having looked at the assertiveness behavior and rhetoric of the individual GPs, let us now put all of this data in a single visual that allows us to easily compare them with each other. Figure 22 shows the overall amount of negative assertiveness – both factual and verbal – displayed by the five great powers we included in our analysis along a uniform yardstick. The x-axis represents the period Jan 1, 2013-Dec 31, 2015; the y-axis shows the amount of events initiated by each of these 5 great powers on that day as a percentage of all international events initiated by any actor on that same day³⁸. To give an example, the highest peak in this graph is for the US on March 17, 2014 (one of the ‘hottest’ days in the Crimea crisis). That day, GDELT extracted 144,762 events, of which 1,148 were assertive US ones (or 0.79%). On the right of the visual, we see which event codes were extracted from the different media sources in declining order of frequency. In this figure, therefore, we see 520,089 events with code ‘111’, which is to ‘criticize or denounce’.

³⁸ Please note that this is a different normalization technique than the one used for the one-by-one analyses, where the amount of events was normalized on the overall amount of assertive events for that actor for that time unit (e.g. per day). This explains the different values on the y-axis, as well as different values for the GPs.

As we see, it is not easy to discern ‘robust’ trends across the three different datasets – mostly because ICEWS data only become available with a one-year delay, whereas Phoenix has only been online for a little over a year and can still best be described as experimental. But we can still identify some important cross-cutting findings. 2015 was a calmer GPA-year than 2014, even though events in Syria towards the end of the year caused a renewed spike. Both GDELT and Phoenix show quite similar overall trends for 2015, even if the relative distances between the GPs are somewhat different. The main message is that over the past two years, Russia has started closing the assertiveness gap with the US – on more than a few days even surpassing it. We also find – robustly – that China’s overall relative negative assertiveness remains lower than Russia and the US, with Europe somewhere midway between it and the more ‘pacific’ India.

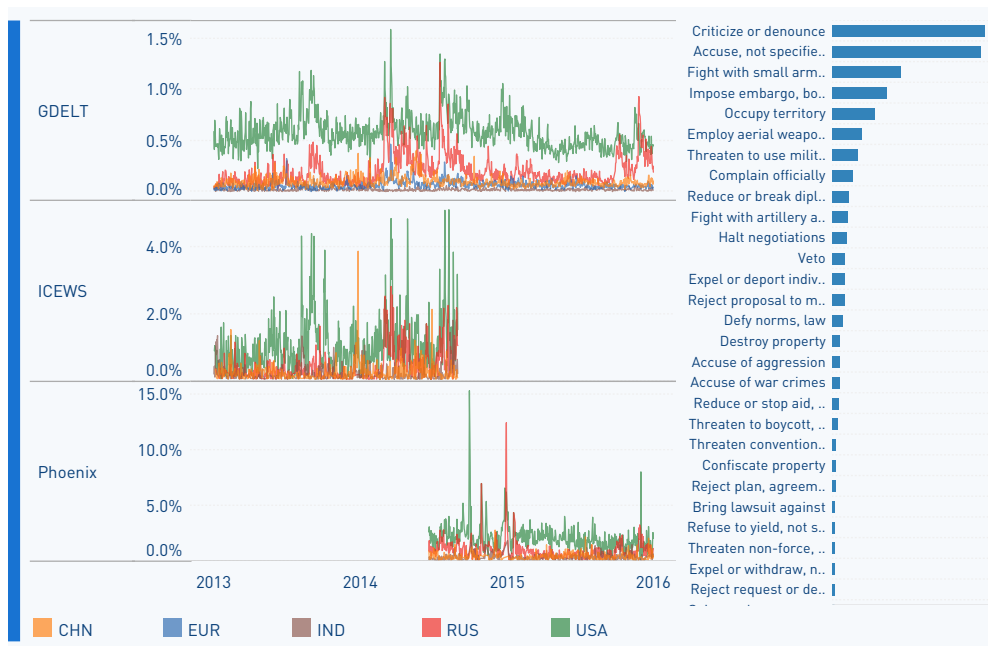


FIGURE 22: COMPARISON OF GREAT POWERS OVERALL NEGATIVE ASSERTIVENESS IN % OF ALL INTERNATIONAL EVENTS INITIATED BY ANY ACTOR ON THAT SAME DAY, 01/2013-12/2015

When we exclude the reported rhetorical events from this visual and just look at the factual ones, this basic finding becomes even more accentuated.

Here Russia exceeds US assertiveness even more frequently. We also observe that China and Europe are much closer together (with Europe exceeding China quite regularly – although that was more the case in 2014 than in 2015) and that India is the factually ‘calm’ superpower.

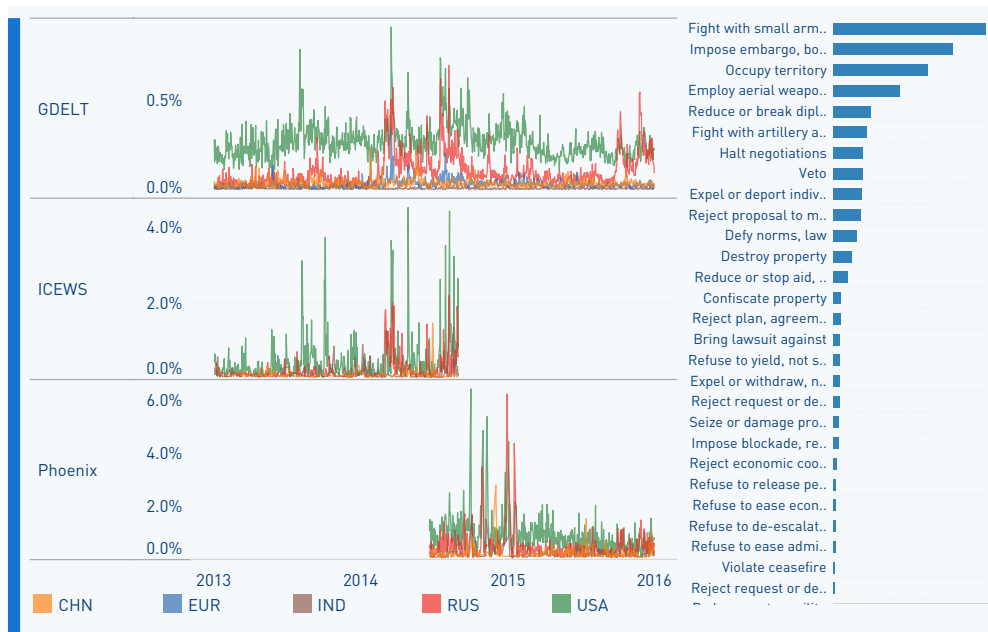


FIGURE 23: COMPARISON OF GREAT POWERS FACTUAL NEGATIVE ASSERTIVENESS IN % OF ALL INTERNATIONAL EVENTS INITIATED BY ANY ACTOR ON THAT SAME DAY, 01/2013-12/2015

Does this picture change when we take a closer look at some of the specific forms of factual assertiveness in the military, economic and diplomatic realms?

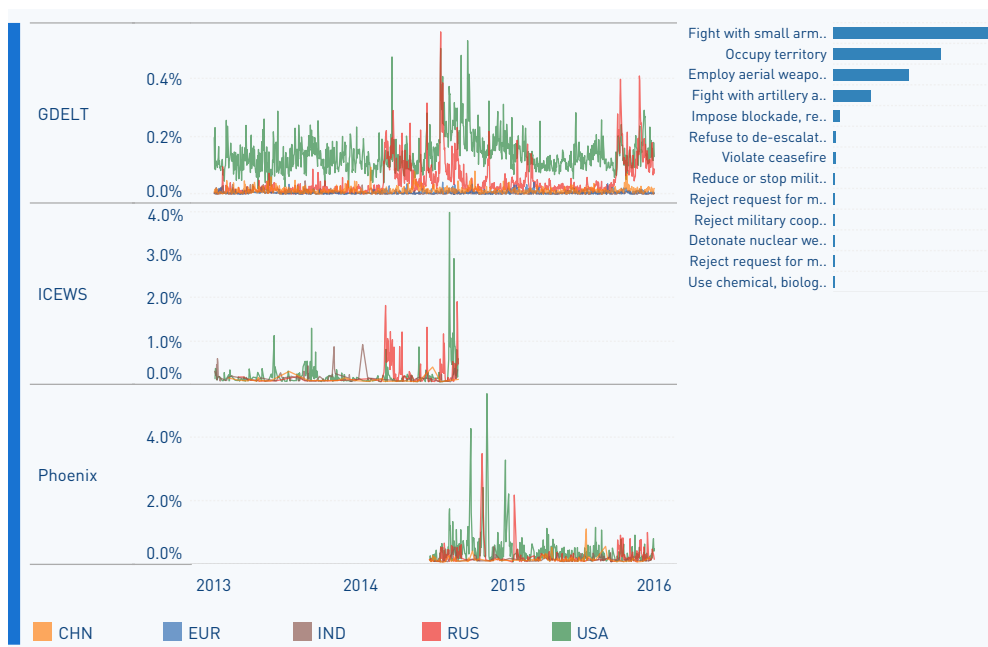


FIGURE 24: COMPARISON OF GREAT POWERS FACTUAL NEGATIVE MILITARY ASSERTIVENESS IN % OF ALL INTERNATIONAL EVENTS INITIATED BY ANY ACTOR ON THAT SAME DAY, 01/2013-12/2015

MILITARY

Figure 24 depicts negative military factual assertiveness for 2013-2015

Also in this figure, we see – in all three datasets – that Russia surpasses the United States in factual military assertiveness a number of times throughout the last 2 years. We also see China surging towards those two and exceeding Europe most (though far from all) of the time and India virtually all of the time.

The other military indicators we collected show a similar picture. We see the US as leading on quite a few indicators, but not all, and as dominant as one might naively think. Figure 26 summarizes the findings of Figure 25 by showing how often a country ranked first, second, third, fourth or last across all categories across all years.



FIGURE 25: COMPARISON OF MILITARY ASSERTIVENESS INDICATORS FOR GREAT POWERS, 2012-2015

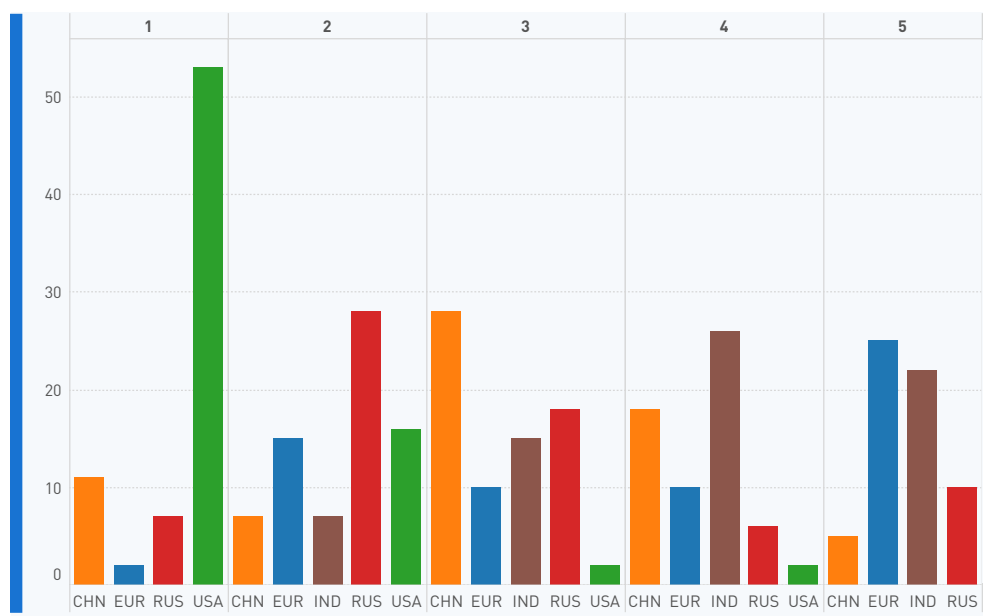


FIGURE 26: RANKING OF MILITARY ASSERTIVENESS INDICATORS AMONG GREAT POWERS

We see that India is the only great power that never reaches the No 1 spot in any of these indicators in any of these years. The US is clearly the dominant military actor, leading in 46 years/categories – in a number of cases quite sizably. But the US’ clear overall dominance is far less absolute than its reputation might suggest. Russia is second in 29 year/categories, and also China also leads in 11 years/categories, compared to 5 for Russia.

ECONOMIC

Figure 27 compares the great powers’ reported manifestations of factual negative economic assertiveness. We observe that also in this category, 2015 was overall a much ‘calmer’ year than 2014, even if Russia starts showing more activity in this category too towards the end of the year. We see that contrary to the two other factual negative categories, the US takes a much less dominant position in the economic one. We note that this does not take into consideration that some of the US dominant position like the role it still plays as a reserve currency or in the international financial institutions is of a more structural nature, and is therefore less likely to be reflected in event datasets. But despite this observation, most experts still agree that the US role in this area does not compare to its relatively much more dominant role in the military area. The findings therefore still remain interesting in our view.

If there is one great power that is visibly punching far above its weight, it is the Russian Federation, especially towards the end of 2015, although even then its level in this category remained significantly below the level it achieved in the exchange of sanctions in the second half of 2014. Europe is clearly in second position here throughout the entire period. But one could still argue that given Europe's unique role in the world economy, these figures show that Europe remains extremely reluctant to use this weight in a negative way through sanctions etc. The same applies to China, which scores even lower on this category. Both Europe and (especially) China score significantly higher when we also take positive assertiveness into consideration (not shown here). India barely registers, although we do see a modest increase in its relative positive economic assertiveness.

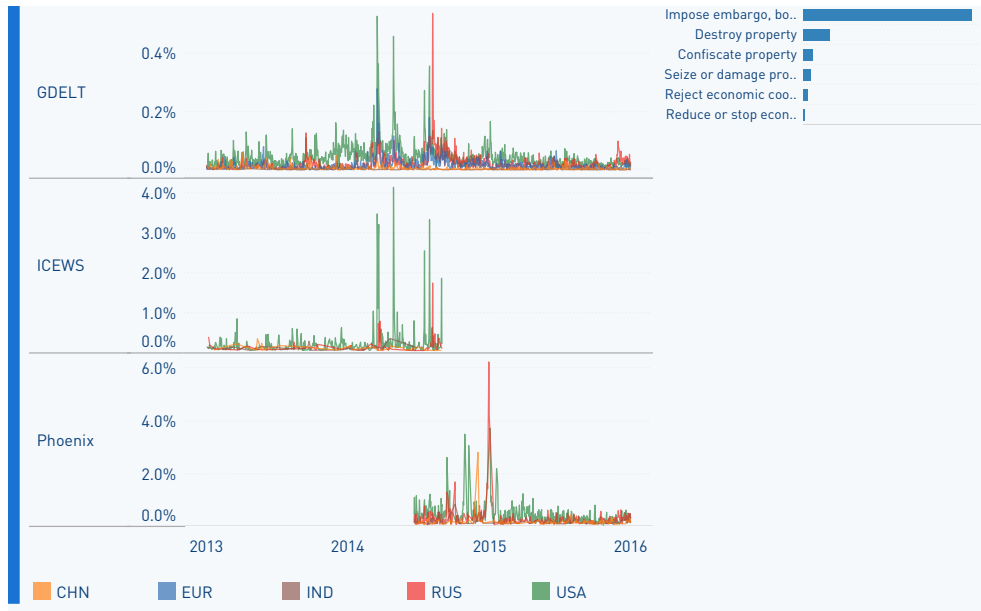


FIGURE 27: COMPARISON OF GREAT POWERS FACTUAL NEGATIVE ECONOMIC ASSERTIVENESS IN % OF ALL INTERNATIONAL EVENTS INITIATED BY ANY ACTOR ON THAT SAME DAY, 01/2013-12/2015

DIPLOMATIC

Also diplomatically, we see that 2015 was a relatively calm year compared to the two previous ones. We see also here that Russia's diplomatic assertiveness regularly exceeds that of the US, especially towards the end of the year with its more active stance on (and intervention in) Syria. China's negative diplomatic assertiveness seems noticeably more subdued in 2015 than in 2014 and remains

almost consistently below than of the US and Russia. Europe stays even under the Chinese level, and India barely registers in this category as well. [We note that Europe’s positive diplomatic assertiveness in areas such as the provision of humanitarian aid or granting asylum is second to none of the other great powers in 2015 throughout the Fall of 2015 (not shown here)]

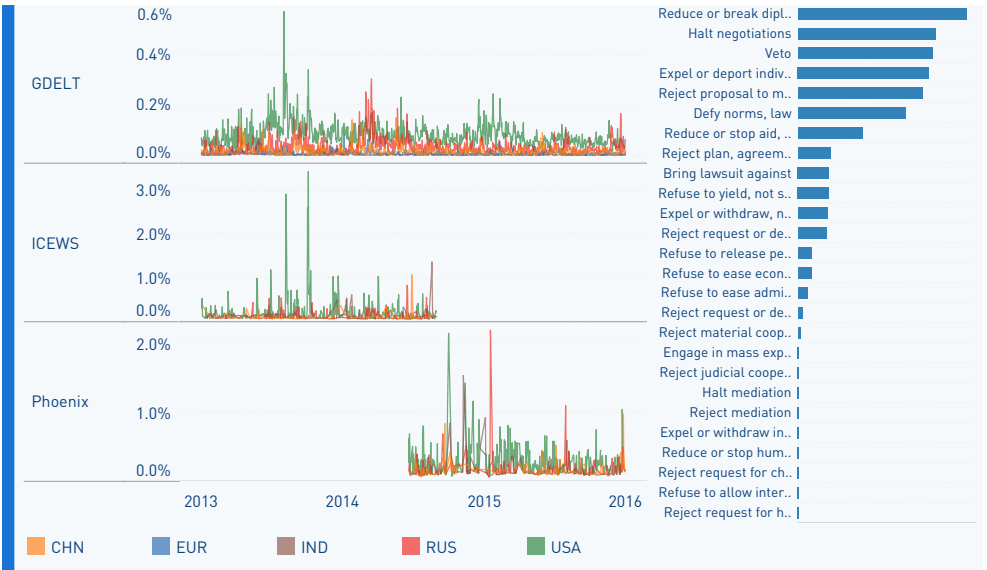


FIGURE 28: COMPARISON OF GREAT POWERS FACTUAL NEGATIVE DIPLOMATIC ASSERTIVENESS IN % OF ALL INTERNATIONAL EVENTS INITIATED BY ANY ACTOR ON THAT SAME DAY, 01/2013-12/2015

2.5 THE NETHERLANDS IN GREAT POWER ASSERTIVENESS

The assertiveness story we have described so far dealt exclusively with the great powers. How does the Netherlands fit into the global assertiveness story?

OVERALL

The next few visuals show the countries that have behaved assertively towards the Netherlands since Jan 1, 2013 – first overall, and then in a few relevant categories. The x-axis of all of these scatterplots shows the number of positive events towards the Netherlands, the y-axis the number of negative ones. We point out that both axes are logarithmic scales. The color of the data points is scaled along a green-red color scale, whereby the darkest green indicates that all assertive events fall in the ‘positive’ category, and the darkest red means they all fall in the negative one.

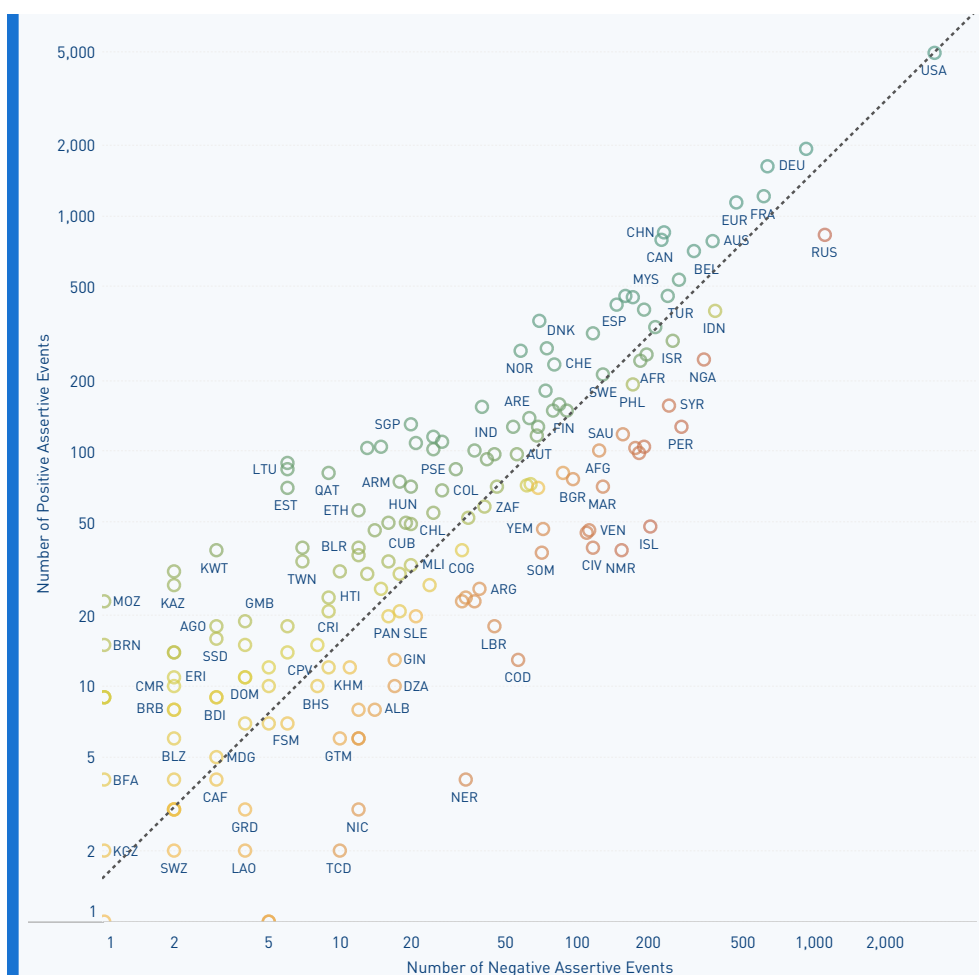


FIGURE 29: NUMBER OF EVENTS TARGETED AT THE NETHERLANDS FOR ALL FORMS OF ASSERTIVENESS, 01/2013-12/2015

Figure 29 shows the number of reported events targeted at the Netherlands for all forms of assertiveness. As with all of the data we will present, we see that the Netherlands remains in the fortunate position of being the recipient of far more positive than of negative assertive events. When we then look at the individual countries that behaved assertively towards NLD, we see that the US top this list with 3,130 positive events vs. 1,825 negative ones. The second most assertive country is Russia, with 1,026 negative events vs. 674 positive ones. The US and Russia thus, from a Dutch point of view, still remain the two most directly relevant ‘superpowers’, with the US being an overwhelmingly positive one, and

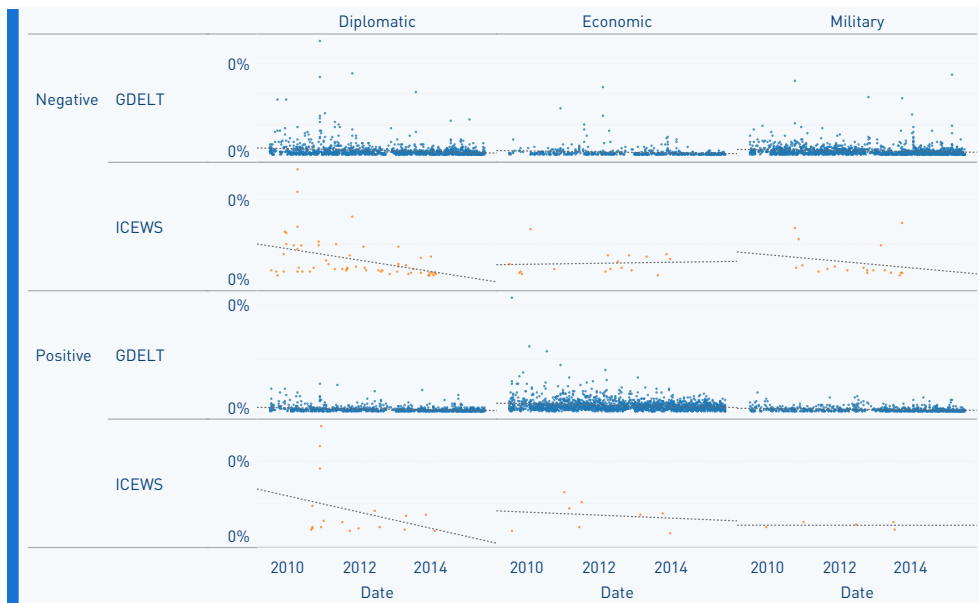


FIGURE 30: ASSERTIVENESS TARGETED AT THE NETHERLANDS BY CATEGORIES, 2010-2016

Russia being an increasingly negative one. Next on the ranking list we find three of the four larger European powers that are direct neighbors of the Netherlands: the UK, France and Germany, with France slightly less positive than Germany or the UK. Other notable findings are the high score of Indonesia, with just slightly more negative than positive reported events targeted at the Netherlands.

If we take a look at the other main great powers, we find both China and India relatively high up in the list of ‘positively’ assertive countries: China as the 6th most positive country with 649 positive vs 146 negative ones; and India in 36th position with 22 negative events vs 75 positive ones.

The following list shows the top-10 countries that have initiated the most positive (on the left – with the US in the lead) and the most negative (on the right – with Russia in the lead) assertive events towards NLD.

	Source Country	Percentile of Positivity Score	Negative Events	Positive Events		Source Country	Percentile of Positivity Score	Negative Events	Positive Events
1	USA	100%	1,825	3,130		RUS	0%	1,026	674
2	GBR	99.46%	478	1,288		NMR	0.54%	135	25
3	EUR	98.91%	273	762		BRA	1.09%	178	50
4	DEU	98.37%	382	938		MAR	2.17%	101	42
5	CAN	97.83%	179	537		CIV	2.17%	69	24
6	CHN	97.28%	146	649		VEN	2.72%	97	32
7	FRA	96.74%	421	847		PRK	3.80%	14	0
8	AUS	96.74%	239	615		COD	3.80%	27	7
9	BEL	95.65%	183	476		LBY	4.35%	31	22
10	KEN	95.11%	196	419		SRB	5.43%	17	12
11	GRC	94.57%	36	269		AFG	5.43%	29	17
12	JPN	94.02%	101	326		MHL	5.98%	5	0
13	NOR	93.48%	36	207		SOM	8.15%	21	8
14	IRL	92.93%	72	227		SAU	8.15%	145	66
15	MYS	92.39%	153	453		ISL	8.15%	25	14
16	DNK	91.85%	50	192		DJI	8.15%	4	0
17	ITA	91.30%	131	255		UZB	10.87%	5	5
18	ESP	90.76%	88	229		SYR	10.87%	118	107
19	KOR	90.22%	15	105		FSM	10.87%	3	0

TABLE 2: COUNTRIES RANKED BY NUMBER OF POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE ASSERTIVE EVENTS TOWARDS THE NETHERLANDS.

In the list of the most negative countries, we find some countries that one would expect, such as Russia, Morocco, Venezuela, North Korea, Libya, Syria, Saudi-Arabia or Afghanistan. But we also find a number of surprises, such as Brazil (the second most ‘negative’ country in this list after Russia) or the Ivory Coast.

TRENDS

If we look at the trends over time for these different categories of assertiveness targeted at the Netherlands, we – again – find mostly positive news. GDELT depicts a uniformly positive trend in which all categories of assertiveness towards the Netherlands continue to decline from already very low levels. ICEWS, with a much smaller number of events, still shows 5 out of 6 categories of assertiveness as declining, with the only exception being the negative economic one.

MILITARY

Figure 31 shows the countries that were reported to have behaved assertively towards the Netherlands in terms of factual military events in the period

between January 1, 2013 and December 31, 2015. The US once again – surprisingly – tops this list with 446 negative and 146 positive reported events in this category³⁹.

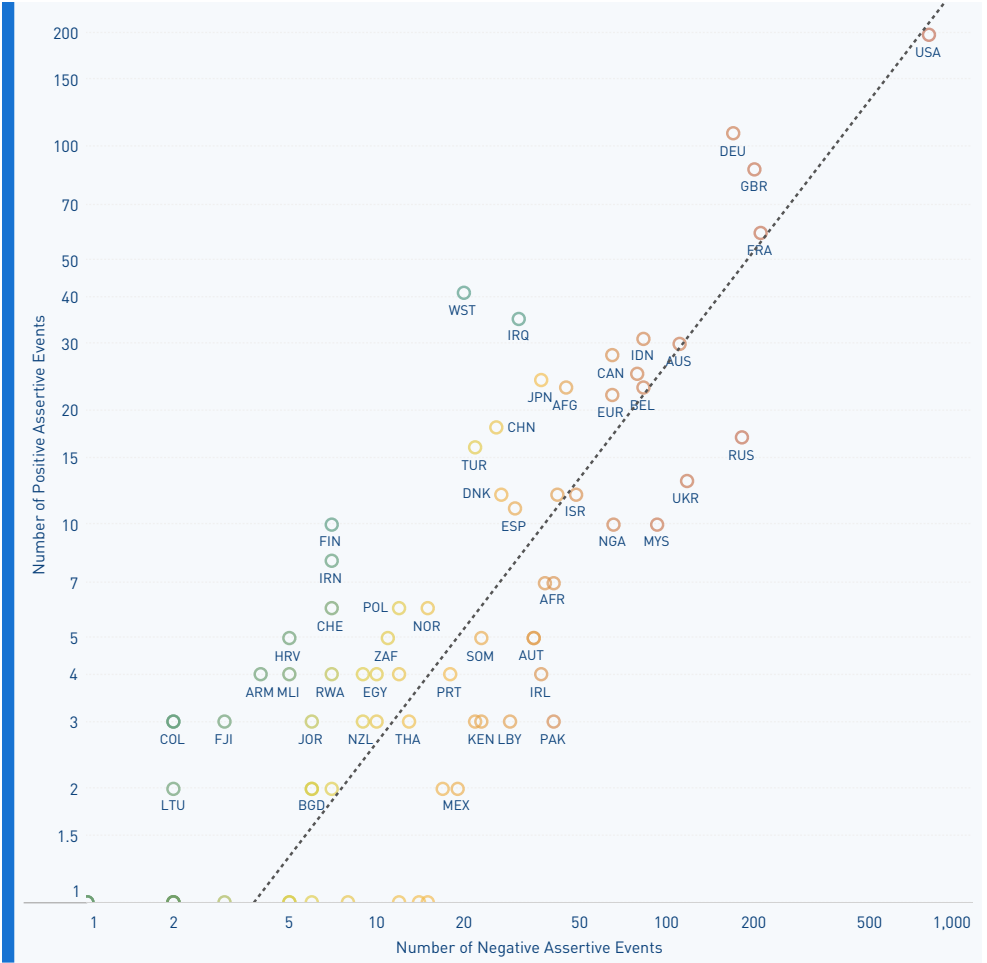


FIGURE 31: NUMBER OF EVENTS TARGETED AT THE NETHERLANDS FOR FACTUAL MILITARY ASSERTIVENESS, 01/2013-12/2015

39 A deeper dive in the data shows that this finding is due to a significant number of ‘false positives’, mostly related to the codes ‘193’ (“Fight with small arms and light weapons”) and (to a lesser extent) ‘192’ (“Occupy territory”). Under code ‘193’, we find a lot of media reports of guns being used in towns like ‘Holland’ (MI), or people having committed armed felonies escaping through the ‘Holland tunnel’ (in New York City), or a US movies being ‘shot’ by a Dutch director, etc. Code 193 was partially coded accurately, as in cases where the US was encouraging the Netherlands to take territorial defense (of NATO borders) more seriously, but it also contained references to US companies (like Netflix) continuing their ‘expansion’ into the Netherlands.

The overall numbers in these category are – not surprisingly, but still encouragingly – quite low for most countries.

ECONOMY

If we take a closer look at the factual economic assertive events, we first of all notice that the positive events clearly dominate the negative ones. Russia takes the first spot in the negative category with the ‘counter-sanctions’ it levied on a number of Western countries, followed by Saudi Arabia and the US (which registers a much larger number of positive economic assertive events). Of the great powers, China ends up relatively high on the negative ranking, but with still 5x more positive than negative events. We find India back with 0 negative events and 28 positive ones.

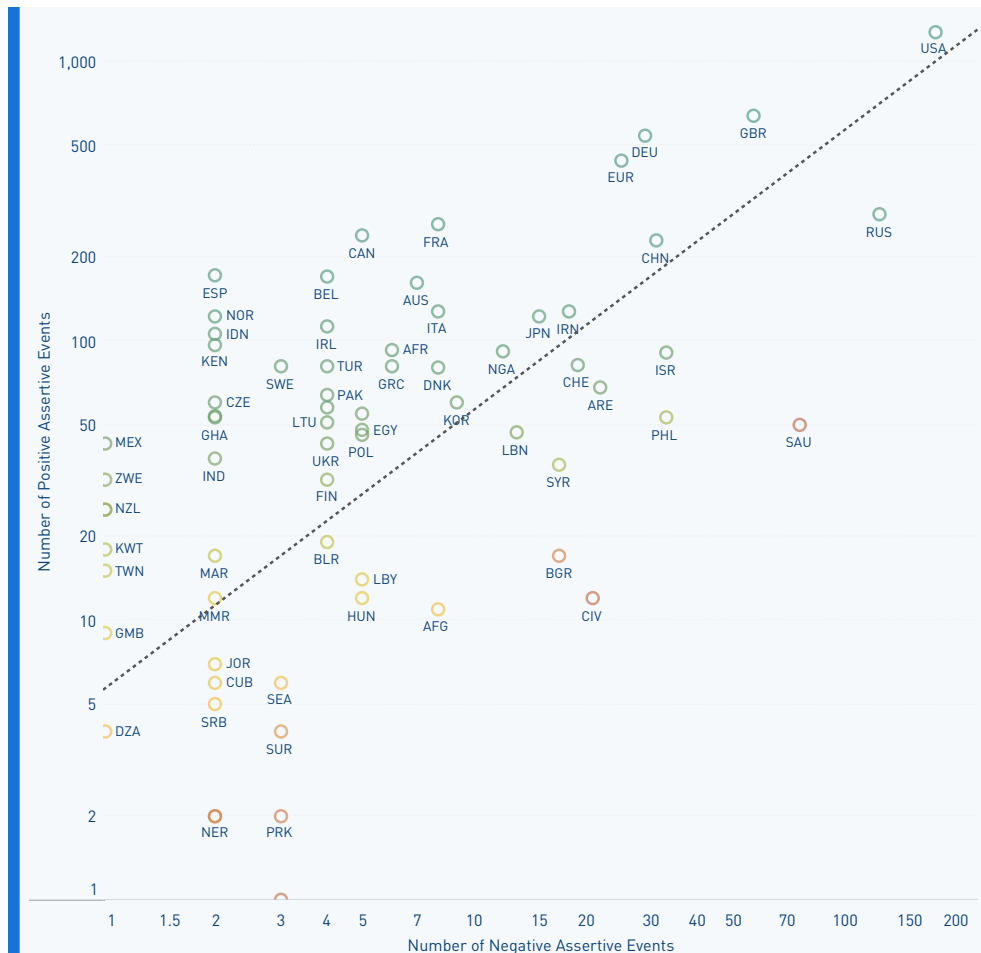


FIGURE 32: NUMBER OF EVENTS TARGETED AT THE NETHERLANDS FOR FACTUAL ECONOMIC ASSERTIVENESS, 01/2013-12/2015

3 WHAT CAN BE DONE

Before concluding this report, we formulate a number of general thoughts on how to deal with increased great power assertiveness. We first explore some lessons that have been learned in another area closer to most of our daily lives (bullying in school) where destructive assertiveness occurs surprisingly frequently and where researchers have been able to take a closer real-life look at the types of ‘interventions’ that may or may not work. We then wrap this section up with a number of general suggestions for areas where defense and security organizations – also of smaller countries – might be able to play a role.

3.1 CAN ASSERTIVITIS BE ‘CURED’?

This study has described assertivitis (semi-facetiously) as a pathological – and dangerous – condition that some (though not all) great powers seem particularly susceptible to. If such is the case, what does the literature tell us about how to deal with analogous afflictions in human beings? To explore this line of inquiry, HCSS consulted the (meta-) literature on bullying behavior in schools⁴⁰. Bullying behavior, a subset of the larger category of antisocial-aggressive behavior, “represents a unique and distinctly defined phenomenon. Bullying is usually defined as repeated acts of aggression, intimidation, or coercion against a victim who is weaker than the perpetrator in terms of physical size, psychological/social power, or other factors that result in a notable power differential”⁴¹. In this sense bullying is regrettably yet remarkably similar to many ‘great’ powers’ behavioral and/or ideational attitudes towards their smaller peers in international relations. International brinkmanship is a phenomenon with a great potential (and a bloodily proven historical track record) of disrupting the ‘march of civilization’ (de ‘vaart der volkeren’). How can we ‘arm’ ourselves against it? Traditional philosophers (from Aristotle to Rousseau) as well as early

40 Sexual harassment or spousal abuse would be two other areas to look at, but they tend to be more dyadic.

41 Kenneth W. Merrell et al., “How Effective Are School Bullying Intervention Programs? A Meta-Analysis of Intervention Research,” *School Psychology Quarterly* 23, no. 1 (March 2008): 26–42, doi:10.1037/1045-3830.23.1.26.

modern ('classical realist') international relations scholars like Raymond Aron or Hans Morgenthau were much less reluctant than contemporary scholars to draw comparisons between human beings and 'nations' or 'countries'. In drawing this – unorthodox – comparison between school bullies and international bullies, we do not wish to suggest the two are identical. But we do submit that, *mutatis mutandis*, there might be some useful insights or even lessons to be learned in these areas and that it would behoove our field to venture beyond the confines of our current disciplinary boundaries in search for usefully actionable policy perspectives⁴².

Bullying in schools is a widespread – though apparently declining – phenomenon that affects 100s of millions of children all around the world. Diverse studies from countries like Australia, Germany, Norway, Spain, the UK and the USA reveal that between 20 and 30% of the students are involved in episodes of violence ranging from simple verbal intimidation to severe forms of physical or sexual aggression⁴³. For a long time, such actions which we now qualify as bullying were often dismissed as typical adolescent behavior: regrettable but unavoidable. They were therefore often overlooked and/or endured at the unfortunate expense of those who were victimized⁴⁴. This attitude towards

42 More generally, we have – also in other HCSS publications – drawn attention to the fact that in our opinion the discipline of international relations has become far too 'insular'. The main ambition of 'neo'-classical scholars (with Kenneth Waltz marching up front) was to break the field out of its isolation and to bring it back from a more discursive and/or naively behaviorist tradition into the more 'orthodox' 'social sciences'. Unfortunately, the neo-classical onslaught on the field seems have produced the opposite effect. Our claim in these matters, however, is less philosophical/epistemological than it is practical. Given the continued turmoil in the world, we (as a discipline) cannot be fully satisfied with the ways in which we currently analyze international security issues and generate policy options. It therefore stands to reason, we submit, that we may wish to broaden our (also theoretical) perspectives to look more broadly at the 'entire' (latent and currently disjointed) field of 'security studies' in search of useful, actionable(/designable) policy insights. It is from this perspective that we present our school bullying analogy. See also Stephan De Spiegeleire, Eline Chivot, and Tim Sweijs, "Conceptual Foundations of Security. Final Deliverable of Work Package 1.1 of 'European Security Trends and Threats In Society' (ETTIS), a European Union Seventh Framework Programme Collaborative Research Project," *European Security Trends and Threats in Society* (The Hague: The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies (HCSS), December 2012):153-160.

43 José Antonio Jiménez-Barbero et al., "Effectiveness of Anti-Bullying School Programs: A Meta-Analysis," *Children and Youth Services Review* 61 (February 2016): 165–75, doi:10.1016/j.childyouth.2015.12.015

44 Abigail McNamee and Mia Mercurio, "School-Wide Intervention in the Childhood Bullying Triangle," *Childhood Education* 84, no. 6 (2008): 370–78. Tracy Vaillancourt et al., "Optimizing Population Screening of Bullying in School-Aged Children," *Journal of School Violence* 9, no. 3 (2010): 233–50. Anita Young et al., "Empowering Students: Using Data to Transform a Bullying Prevention and Intervention Program," *Professional School Counseling* 12, no. 6 (2009): 413–20. Michelle Marie Kendrick, "Evaluating the Effects of the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program on Middle School Bullying," 2015, <http://scholarworks.waldenu.edu/dissertations/1606/>

bullying is not unlike those scholars who claim that in an anarchic world, states – and especially great powers – can be expected to behave in analogous ways. Societal attitudes towards bullying in schools, however, have changed dramatically, as parents, school administrations, and national politicians no longer proved willing to accept this as a ‘fact of life’. This has led to a major world-wide effort to tackle this problem head-on.

Normal Conflict	Bullying
Equal power/between friends	Imbalance of power/not friends
Happens occasionally	Repeated negative actions
Accidental	Purposeful
Not serious emotional harm	Serious, with threat of physical or emotional harm
Equal emotional reaction	Strong emotional reaction from victim/ little or no reaction from bully
Not seeking power or attention	Seeking power/control
Not trying to get something	Attempt to gain power/material things
Remorse/takes responsibility	No remorse/blames victim
Effort to resolve problem	No effort to solve problem
Garrity, C., Jens. K., Porter, W., Sager, N. & Short-Camilli, C. (2004). Bonds.M. & Stoker, S. (2000).	

FIGURE 33: DIFFERENCES BETWEEN NORMAL CONFLICT AND BULLYING.

As a result of this new effort, the phenomenon of school bullying has been intensively investigated based on data sets that are much more mature (also including controlled tests) and richer than the ones we have at our disposal for investigating great power bullying. Increased recognition and awareness of school bullying has led to a large number of school prevention programs⁴⁵ and

45 Maria M. Ttofi and David P. Farrington, “Effectiveness of School-Based Programs to Reduce Bullying: A Systematic and Meta-Analytic Review,” *Journal of Experimental Criminology* 7, no. 1 (2011): 27–56; Jose Antonio Jiménez-Barbero et al., “Effectiveness of Antibullying School Programmes: A Systematic Review by Evidence Levels,” *Children and Youth Services Review* 34, no. 9 (2012): 1646–58

to some systematic reviews and meta-analyses of these⁴⁶. One might have hoped that such an effort would have led to some incontrovertible findings about what works and does not work. Alas, such is not the case. In sharp contrast to the analogous type of state behavior we focused on this report, there are tens of fairly rigorous studies from across the world that have collected evidence on the effectiveness of anti-bullying programs – some of them even using controlled experiments. Yet researchers remain modest in the conclusions they draw. The number of studies remains relatively low, the documentation is not always ideal and there have not really been any fully randomized trials.⁴⁷

But despite these caveats, we still find some interesting glimpses into what does and does not seem to work. The range of ‘interventions’ in school anti-bullying programs is quite wide. It includes curriculum interventions (lectures, videos, class discussions, even entire modules to help children develop prosocial conflict resolution skills), multidisciplinary or schoolwide interventions (some combination of schoolwide rules and sanctions, teacher training, classroom curriculum, conflict resolution training, and individual counseling), social skills groups (targeted interventions involving social and behavioral skills groups for children involved – actively or passively – in bullying through befriending and peer mediation); and mentoring and social worker support (e.g. increasing the number of school counsellors and/or social workers, mentoring of at-risk children, etc.).

Of all of these interventions the ones that address the systemic issues and the overall social environment related to bullying appear to be the most successful. “The whole-school interventions, which included multiple disciplines and

46 Rachel C. Vreeman and Aaron E. Carroll, “A Systematic Review of School-Based Interventions to Prevent Bullying,” *Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine* 161, no. 1 (2007): 78–88; Merrell et al., “How Effective Are School Bullying Intervention Programs?”; Julie A Mytton, “School-Based Secondary Prevention Programmes for Preventing Violence,” ed. Carolyn DiGuseppi et al., *Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews*, no. 4 (July 26, 2009), <http://library3.webster.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=chh&AN=C-D004606&site=ehost-live>; Hyoun-Kyoung Park-Higgerson et al., “The Evaluation of School-Based Violence Prevention Programs: A Meta-Analysis,” *Journal of School Health* 78, no. 9 (September 2008): 465–79, doi:10.1111/j.1746-1561.2008.00332.x; Jiménez-Barbero et al., “Effectiveness of Anti-Bullying School Programs,” Faye Mishna, “An Overview of the Evidence on Bullying Prevention and Intervention Programs,” *Brief Treatment and Crisis Intervention* 8, no. 4 (2008): 327.

47 Maria M. Ttofi and David P. Farrington, “Bullying Prevention Programs: The Importance of Peer Intervention, Disciplinary Methods and Age Variations,” *Journal of Experimental Criminology* 8, no. 4 (2012): 443–62

complementary components directed at different levels of the school organization, more often reduced victimization and bullying than the interventions that only included classroom-level curricula or social skills groups”⁴⁸. There also seems to be quite a bit of evidence that firm disciplinary methods (sanctions for bullying) tend to be more effective than other methods⁴⁹.

If we attempt to bring these results back to the great powers in international relations, these findings suggest that we may need a system-wide (as opposed to ad-hoc) approach that also contains distinct elements of disciplining. It is clear that the ‘governance’ structure in the educational realm is different from that in the realm of world politics. Schools (and school districts and national educational authorities) have a clear mandate from their stakeholders to deal with bullying. The same cannot (yet?) be said of the international system. We still feel, however, that it remains important to keep highlighting that the international community will have to find better ways to deal with its own ‘bullies’ and that in this quest, it should keep an eye on how other governance structures are grappling with analogous issues in different spheres of life.

3.2 GENERAL SUGGESTIONS

Bringing our discussion back to the international system, we venture a few suggestions on what we think the Dutch defense and security ecosystem – and its international counterparts – might be able to do about state ‘bullies’. Since this study focused on mapping the manifestations of great power assertiveness, and not on identifying the pathways that lead to it, these suggestions are essentially best viewed as our best-effort attempts to suggest useful and actionable courses of action to be experimented with.

Monitor and expose dangerous GPA. Given the unique role that great powers play in world affairs and the escalatory dangers that lurk behind various forms of (especially military) assertiveness, any effective strategy for dealing with GPA requires a more fine-tuned and reliable facts-based sensing

48 Vreeman and Carroll, “A Systematic Review of School-Based Interventions to Prevent Bullying.”

49 “Most are inspired by the program of Dan Olweus (1993:87) who specifies the following range of sanctions for bullying: serious individual talk with the student; making the student sit outside the principal’s office during some break periods; making the student spend one or more hours in another class, perhaps with younger students; making the student stay close to the supervising teacher during a number of recesses; sending the student for a serious talk with the principal; depriving the student of some privilege.”

mechanism that would allow the international community to ring the alarm bell as soon as certain agreed thresholds are crossed. Our own attempts at monitoring great power assertiveness suggest, we hope, that it is increasingly possible to flag ‘excessive’ brinkmanship based on detailed and balanced near-real time evidence. Authoritative international organizations like the IMF, the World Bank, the World Trade Organization and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development already perform similar international monitoring efforts in areas like economic, education, health, trade policy, etc. It seems unlikely that our current *international* security organizations (NATO, OSCE, AU, UN, etc.) would be willing to assume such a role. But it may still prove possible for a number of smaller countries from different continents to team up to provide the international community with such a capability. Crucial is that the message should not be part of a ‘Calimero’ narrative, but evidence-based. This is not naming and shaming, but letting the cold facts speak for themselves.

Puncture pathos and promote perspective. Negative assertive behavior is regularly couched by the perpetrators in emotional verbiage about past endured injustices, unfair treatment, misunderstood actions, etc. Whether such allegations are legitimate or not can only be established by disassembling them into fact and fiction with surgical precision. If the international community wants to make some progress in this area, it stands to reason that it will have to find more reliably neutral ways to puncture the pathos with facts and figures – especially towards the societies on all sides that are subjected to various distorted or one-sided narratives. This may be an area where dispassionate epistemic communities from various countries (preferably also from the countries involved – actively and passively – in assertive behavior) could play a uniquely positive role.

Mobilize moderation. Most societies (like individuals) carry in themselves the seeds of both moderation and excess. Societies that are being swept up by their own or by external political entrepreneurs into bouts of jingoistic fervor typically still contain silent majorities that just condone or go along with these excesses (as well as smaller groups that might actively resist it). In this age of global connectivity, it is more possible than ever to reach and empower those groups or even individuals. Individual countries like the Netherlands could certainly play a role in this area in a number of selected countries where their

interests are at stake. In some of the vignettes we wrote into our '*Si vis pacem, para utique pacem*' study, for instance, HCSS suggested that the 1st Civil-Military Integration Command of the Dutch Army could have played a role along these lines in the run-up to the dramatic events in Ukraine in 2014⁵⁰. In light of the large streams of refugees from different conflict zones that have looked for, and found, refuge in the Netherlands, it would certainly be interesting to experiment with various ways in which these communities could be used to re-empower the agents of security resilience in their troubled regions of origin.

Step up early to a 'light' mode of crisis management. As the general 'assertiveness' literature suggests, interventions need to target the bully at multiple levels, addressing the overall – social or otherwise – context in which the bully operates and directly taking on and trying to change his incentive structure. Firm deterrent and compellent measures are not to be shied away from. In the realm of international relations, this means that one should consider aggressive assertive behavior as a first step on a crisis escalation ladder. This recognition implies that one should start applying crisis management procedures and techniques. However, stepping up to a crisis management mode should be seen as a smooth and unobtrusive process, and not as an assertive, escalatory move itself (hence our use of the word 'light'). Once in such a mode, the lessons listed in a dedicated paper on Crisis Management that HCSS has recently produced as part of its contribution to the Strategic Monitor fully apply.

Chapter 'VI-and-a-Quarter' Efforts? The international community currently does not have the wherewithal to take a firm stand against excessive assertiveness. It can – and regularly does – express concern or even condemn certain actions by great powers. But some of the great powers that this report identifies as some of the worst 'culprits' still have veto powers in the Security Council. This severely limits the scope and likelihood of more muscular internationally sanctioned interventions in these perilous dynamics. The UN Charter just talks about Chapter VI (the peaceful resolution of disputes by diplomatic or judicial means) discussions and Chapter VII (peace enforcement) military operations. Over the past few decades the term 'Chapter VI-and-a-Half' has become popular as a solution 'in between' Chapters VI and VII. It was coined

50 Oosterveld et al., *Si Vis Pacem, Para Utique Pacem*. Individual Empowerment, Societal Resilience and the Armed Forces.: 98-101.

by former UN Secretary General Dag Hammarskjöld to cover the numerous – quite successful – peacekeeping operations that have been carried out under the UN flag. Would it be conceivable to also start thinking about Chapter ‘VI-and-a-Quarter’ efforts whereby the United Nations, once the observed level of assertiveness of a certain great power crosses a certain pre-defined threshold, could step up its efforts along the lines described in the previous suggestions? And could parts of the Dutch Armed Forces pursue their second ‘main task’ by playing a role in this – not to weaken, but instead to “protect and promote the international rule of law”, as stated in Art. 97 of the Dutch Constitution?

Catalyze ‘Adult Supervision’. All major (and not-so-major) players in the international system – including companies, NGOs, cities, etc. – are affected by the clear and present dangers that growing great power assertiveness represent. Given the structural limitations of international global governance, the broader international community might be triggered to develop a number of complementary mechanisms to deal with this. It is, for instance, conceivable that some of them would organize ‘global solutions networks’ around great power assertiveness that would ‘clinically’ monitor behavior, dissect rhetoric, ‘target’ and empower silent majorities, identify possible ways out of impasses. Defense and security organizations – maybe even especially of a number of small- and medium-sized countries – might be able to play a catalytic role in this development.

As in previous years, we continue to caution against too one-sidedly gloomy a picture of global security trends. Even in the demonstrably assertive great powers China and Russia, and also in the United States, the evidence presented in this study deals mainly with how their ‘officialdom’ asserts national power globally. We did not explicitly examine to what extent this ‘official’ assertiveness is supported by these countries’ societies. There can be little doubt that in all three aforementioned cases, there is a significant degree of domestic political support for such assertive behavior and rhetoric. But we also are starting to see – certainly (very recently) in Russia and (since the beginning of this decade) in The United States – that this support is not unconditional and that it can backfire. When people start feeling the ‘fallout’ of such assertive behavior in their own pocketbooks, jingoistic siren songs lose a lot of their appeal. It will be interesting to see whether we start observing similar trends in China as well if or when its economic fortunes start to turn. In that case, like in Russia, the regime

may try to further whip up nationalist sentiments to deflect attention from these internal troubles. But, again like in Russia, it remains to be seen whether today's societies remain malleable to such an extent for such a long time. We also know that every one of these countries is undergoing profound societal changes that are triggered by the physical- and social-technological revolutions that are engulfing the entire world. But these countervailing trends do not and cannot discharge us from our responsibility to address current symptoms of great power assertivitis described in this report in our defense and security thinking and planning.

Summing up: First and foremost, as we emphasized in our previous report, we still feel it is of critical importance to get the assertiveness story 'right'. We feel we made some further steps towards this goal in this report by broadening the evidentiary base of our analysis. But we remain conscious of the fact that there is more that we have to (and probably can) do on this score. For every single claim that country X or Y is engaging in unacceptable assertive activities, we should be able to put that claim against the background of what we ourselves and others are doing. There may even be an opportunity to construct such dispassionate, evidence-based datasets in cooperation with researchers from these countries themselves – an opportunity HCSS is eager to pursue.

But even if we get the story 'right', we still have to be able to design a portfolio of policy, capability and partnership options to deal with these demonstrable cases of destabilizing *assertivitis*. This report is part of the Dutch government's effort to monitor its security environment. As such, its focus has been on the diagnosis more than on the therapy. But we want to conclude this report by a clarion call for a broader discussion about how we, as the Netherlands, as Europe, as the international community respond to these cases of *assertivitis*. Many seem to think that we should counter assertiveness with assertiveness – that Europe, for instance, should start behaving more like the others great powers. We continue to think that an asymmetric response – an anti-assertiveness strategy instead of a counter-assertiveness one – might prove to be a more promising option. We would certainly welcome a broader debate on this.

4 CONCLUSIONS

The different datasets about great power assertiveness that we have collected, meshed, visualized and analyzed paint a differentiated, but overall deeply worrisome picture about these still quite unique actors in the international system.

Our datasets do not reveal increased great power assertiveness across the board. Our event data do show that the presumably most dangerous form of assertiveness – the factual negative military one – did increase quite noticeably over the past few years. When we look at the other (non-event-based) indicators of assertiveness, however, we see a more balanced picture. Overall arms sales by great powers have declined somewhat in recent years and they stay significantly below the high levels that characterized the Cold War. Military expenditures by all great powers taken together have stabilized and even declined somewhat in recent years after steady increases in the first decade of this century. In terms of military personnel as percentage of the active labor force, 2013 was the lowest year for this indicators since 1992. Great powers deployed significantly fewer troops in 2013 than in 2012 (from 330k to 280k). In 2014, that trend was reversed somewhat (to 285k) but still remained significantly lower than in 2013.

The various weapon systems that we looked at also show a mixed picture. We see fairly sizeable increases in overall number of 4th and 5th generation aircraft, attack helicopters, cruisers/destroyers; heavy unmanned aerial vehicles, modern AIFVs, main battle tanks (they were still declining in 2012, but then increased significantly in 2013) and principal amphibious ships. But we see declines in bomber aircraft, frigates and in tankers/mixed tanker-transport aircraft. Other categories either increased slightly or stayed even. We hasten to add that, based on the steep longer-term investment plans of both Russia and China, these countries' projected future trajectories presage a darker future in many of these categories. But at this moment in time, the

evidence we collected does not show the major spikes in overall great power assertiveness that pundits seem to assume.

When we turn our attention to the individual great powers, however, the data reveal a quite different, more threatening picture – even just based on current data (and not projected trends). Here we find two Great Powers that show clear signs of what we have called *assertivitis* – an affliction that is characterized by an almost pathological (from a Western European point of view) inclination to assert one’s power, especially in negative ways. One – China – of developed *assertivitis* and one – Russia – of inchoate (but recidivist) acute *assertivitis*. We find another great power – the United States – that has been suffering from chronic *assertivitis* for an extended period of time but seems to have embarked upon the path of (a modest and uneven) recovery. And we find two Great Powers – India and the European Union – that are by and large asymptomatic and do not (yet?) appear to be suffering from this affliction. They exhibit an overall much lower-profile stance, even though they also display what may still prove to be early symptoms of *assertivitis*: in the case of Europe mostly in the (both positive *and* negative) economic realm; and in the case of India in a number of forms of positive assertiveness.

In our 2014 report we noted that tensions between great powers had increased, even though we still saw powerful countervailing trends that provided at least a modicum of anti-dote to *assertivitis*. We argued that “the sentiment was, and to a large extent remains, that on balance, all potential challengers felt and continue to feel sufficiently inhibited to engage into too much brinkmanship. It is important to stress that we see no evidence across our various datasets that this balance has crossed some definitive tipping point. Changes appear to be more linear than exponential.” This year’s report leaves us more worried than in 2014. We have no way to reliably discern where the ‘tipping point’ that pushes the world over the brink exactly lies. But we certainly see a number of great powers – and thus the world as a whole – recklessly moving full steam ahead towards it. The chance of a ‘Cuban Missile crisis’-type event (or worse) in Syria, the South China Sea, Ukraine, Moldova, the Baltics or elsewhere – whether because of miscalculation and unmanageable escalation – continues to increase.

Where does all of this leave Europe in general, and the Netherlands in particular? Our analysis of how the Netherlands fits into this great power assertiveness dynamic still paints an overall comfortingly positive picture. But the MH17 tragedy showed that these fairly positive ‘fundamentals’ offer absolutely no guarantee that the country will not be pulled into some of these dangerous downwards spirals. There can be no ‘splendid isolation’ from these global gales of renewed assertiveness – not even for a small European power that at first glance may seem to be comfortably nested in a ‘safe’ neighborhood. The country’s interconnectedness with its close European and transatlantic partners and with the broader world beyond that, is bound to expose it to the broader worrying trends that we describe in this report.

This suggests that we do need a broader discussion about how even a relatively small country like the Netherlands can deal with these outbreaks of *assertivitis* in some of the great powers of this world. As in previous years, we continue to caution against too one-sidedly gloomy a picture of global security trends. Even in the assertive great powers China and Russia, and also in the United States, the evidence we presented in this study deals primarily with how ‘officialdom’ in these countries asserts its national power globally. We did not explicitly examine to what extent this ‘official’ assertiveness is supported by these countries’ societies. There can be little doubt that in all three aforementioned cases, there is unmistakably a significant degree of domestic political support for such assertive behavior and rhetoric. But we also are starting to see – certainly (recently and timidly) in Russia and (since the beginning of this decade) in the United States – that this support is not unconditional and that it can backfire. When people start feeling the ‘fallout’ of such assertive behavior in their own pocketbooks, jingoistic siren songs tend to lose a lot of their appeal. It will be interesting to find out whether we start observing similar trends in China as well if or when its economic fortunes start to turn. In that case, like in Russia, the regime may try to whip up nationalist sentiments to deflect attention from these internal troubles. But, again like in Russia, it remains to be seen whether today’s societies will prove malleable to such an extent for such a long time. We also know that every one of these countries is undergoing profound societal changes that are triggered by the physical- and social-technological revolutions that are engulfing the entire world⁵¹. But these countervailing trends do not and cannot

51 For an overview of these trends and what they mean for armed forces, see Ibid

discharge us from our responsibility to address the current symptoms of great power assertivitis that we described in this report in our defense and security thinking and planning.

First and foremost, as we emphasized in our previous report, we still feel it is of critical importance to get the assertiveness story ‘right’. We feel we made some further steps towards this goal in this report by broadening the evidentiary base of our analysis. But we remain conscious of the fact that there is more that we have to (and probably can) do on this score. For every single claim that country X or Y is engaging in unacceptable assertive activities, we should be able to put that claim against the background of what we ourselves and others are doing. There may even be an opportunity to construct such dispassionate, evidence-based datasets in cooperation with researchers from these countries themselves – an opportunity HCSS is eager to pursue.

But even if we can get the story ‘right’ (as we firmly believe we can), we still have to be able to design a portfolio of policy, capability and partnership options to deal with these demonstrable cases of destabilizing assertivitis. This report is part of the Dutch government’s effort to monitor its security environment. As such, its focus has been on the ‘diagnosis’ more than on the ‘therapy’. But we want to conclude this report by a clarion call for a broader discussion about how we, as the Netherlands, as Europe, as the international community respond to these cases of assertivitis. Many seem to think that we should counter assertiveness with assertiveness – that Europe, for instance, should start behaving more like the others great powers. We continue to think that an ‘asymmetric’ response – an anti-assertiveness strategy instead of a counter-assertiveness one – might prove to be a more promising option. We look forward to a broader debate on this.

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